

DISSENT

Hired Guns on Astroturf: How to Buy and Sell School Reform

By Joanne Barkan

If you want to change government policy, change the politicians who make it. The implications of this truism have now taken hold in the market-modeled “education reform movement.” As a result, the private funders and nonprofit groups that run the movement have overhauled their strategy. They’ve gone political as never before—like the National Rifle Association or Big Pharma or (ed reformers emphasize) the teachers’ unions.

Devolution of a Movement

For the last decade or so, this generation of ed reformers has been setting up programs to show the power of competition and market-style accountability to transform inner-city public schools: establishing nonprofit and for-profit charter schools, hiring business executives to run school districts, and calculating a teacher’s worth based on student test scores. Along the way, the reformers recognized the value of public promotion and persuasion (called “advocacy”) for their agenda, and they started pouring more money into media outlets, friendly think tanks, and the work of well-disposed researchers. By 2010 critics of the movement saw “reform-think” dominating national discourse about education, but key reform players judged the pace of change too slow.

Ed reformers spend at least a half-billion dollars a year in private money, whereas [government expenditures on K-12 schooling are about \\$525 billion a year](#). Nevertheless, a half-billion dollars in discretionary money yields great leverage when budgets are consumed by ordinary expenses. But the reformers—even titanic Bill and Melinda Gates—see themselves as competing with too little against existing government policies. Hence, to revolutionize public education, which is largely under state and local jurisdiction, reformers must get state and local governments to adopt their agenda as basic policy; they must counter the teachers’ unions’ political clout. To this end, ed reformers are shifting major resources—staff and money—into state and local campaigns for candidates and legislation.

Jonah Edelman, CEO of Stand for Children (\$5.2 million from Gates, 2003-2011), sums up the thinking: “We’ve learned the hard way that if you want to have the clout needed to change policies for kids, you have to help politicians get elected. It’s about money, money, money” (*Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2010).*

* The ed reform movement comprises a large network of nonprofit organizations and consultancies whose funding comes mostly from private foundations. [The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#)—with assets six times larger than Ford, the next largest foundation in the United States—dominates the movement. To give some sense of the interconnections and the scope of the colossal foundation, I note in parentheses the amount of money various groups have received from Gates.

The Great Political Opening

The Obama administration created the perfect opening for the ed reformers' political strategy. The U.S. Department of Education stipulated that in order to win federal funds in the 2010 Race to the Top contest, applicant states would have to pledge to abolish limits on charter schools, legislate teacher and principal evaluations based in part on students' standardized test scores, and fully implement statewide data-collection systems. The mandates spurred money-starved states to propose controversial new education laws. Candidates running for office—from state senator to local school board member—took sides. The ed reform organizations plunged into both legislative and candidate battles, ratcheting up the campaign spending and rhetoric, casting each contest as a battle for the future of the nation through public school reform (tales of the campaigns further on).

The movement's market-modeled reforms have so far produced more failures than successes. Study after study throws into question the value of most charter schools, incessant standardized testing, and grading teachers or closing schools based on student test scores. The ed reformers' drive to get new laws passed aggravates matters by making bad policy mandatory and more widespread. It is mindless micromanaging gone amuck.

Take the case of Tennessee, where 35 percent of every teacher's evaluation is now based on standardized test scores. On November 6, 2011, [the *New York Times* reported](#) that no tests exist for over half the subjects and grades, including kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, art, music, and vocational training. So state officials ruled that a school's average scores for another subject and grade will be used for teachers without student scores. For example, fifth-grade writing scores will be plugged into, say, a first-grade teacher's evaluation. In addition, teachers can choose the plug-in subject themselves for 15 percent of the 35 percent. This means they have to bet on which classes will produce the highest scores. A travesty? Not for the ever-ready boosters of the ed reform movement, including the *New York Times* editorial page. [The *Times* offered this judgment on November 11](#): "...political forces [in Tennessee] are now talking about delaying the use of these evaluations. State lawmakers and education officials must resist any backsliding." Anything goes as long as it's stamped "ed reform."

A summary critique of the reform strategy comes from Frederick Hess, director of education policy at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (\$5.2 million from Gates, 2003-20011) and executive editor of *Education Next* (sponsored in part by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, \$4.2 million from Gates, 2003-2009). Hess swears allegiance to market-based reforms but often criticizes the quality of his allies' actual work. This is from [his November 16, 2011 blog post on *Education Week*](#) (\$4.6 million from Gates, 2005-2009):

By turning school reform into a moral crusade, in which one either is, to quote our last President, "with us or against us," would-be reformers wind up planting their flag atop all kinds of half-baked or ill-conceived proposals....Would-be reformers insist that overshooting the mark with half-baked proposals is actually a strategy, because that's how they'll cow the unions and change the culture of schooling. Indeed, they think concerns about program design are quaint evidence of naiveté.

Chipping Away at Democracy

Yes, the policies of ed reformers are wreaking havoc in public education, but equally destructive is the impact of their strategy on American democracy. From the start, the we-know-best stance, the top-down interventions at every level of schooling, the endless flow of big private money, and the imperviousness to criticism have undermined the "public" in public education. Moreover, the large private foundations that fund the ed reformers are accountable to no one—not to voters, not to parents, not to the children whose lives they affect. The beefed-up political strategy extends the damage: the ed

reformers (most of whom take advantage of tax-exempt status) are immersing themselves in the dollars-mean-votes world of lobbying and campaigning.

The Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* (January 2010) and a related federal appeals court ruling in *SpeechNow.org* (March 2010) created loopholes for nonprofit organizations that effectively abolish all limits on campaign contributions. Ed reformers exploit the new legal framework exactly like other political operatives. This has two marked consequences. First is the fate of the original deal established by Congress—tax-exempt status in exchange for staying away from politics while serving some public good. The deal was eroded before *Citizens United*; now it has collapsed. In the world of ed reform, the political strategy makes a mockery of the tax-exempt privilege of the foundations and nonprofit groups involved. Second, most ed reformers have benefitted from branding themselves as progressives or “lifelong Democrats” (“I love labor unions—just not teachers’ unions”). This has given them credibility with liberals who, like most voters, haven’t paid close attention to the content and results of the ed reforms. The labeling has always been a ruse, but the politicking reformers have obliterated dividing lines: they work in local and state campaigns alongside corporate free-marketers and right-wing social conservatives who’ve long and openly supported privatizing public education, ending social programs, and eviscerating labor unions. In practice, they are one team.

Some funders and their tax-exempt grantees have hesitated to get more involved in politics. On occasion the reluctance has been cultural: they’ve always shied away from public debates on government policy and advocacy in general. More often it’s fear of jeopardizing their tax status. According to IRS regulations

- private foundations—a type of 501(c)3 organization—cannot lobby (defined as trying to influence legislation); they cannot campaign (defined as supporting or criticizing a candidate for public office); they can, however, “educate” anyone, including lawmakers, on any issue;
- most of the recipients of foundation money for ed reform are nonprofit groups with a different 501(c)3 status; they can do a specified amount of lobbying but no campaigning for candidates.

Here is the loophole: this second type of 501(c)3 can set up affiliated groups that do lobby and campaign. It can set up the following:

- political action committees (PACs), which have limits on the size of contributions accepted
- Independent Expenditure Committees (super PACs), which can accept unlimited contributions but cannot “coordinate” work with a candidate or party (an almost meaningless restriction)
- 501(c)4 “social welfare” organizations, such as the AARP and NAACP, which can accept unlimited contributions as long as political activity is not their “primary” activity (another weak restriction)
- 527 organizations that advocate only for issues, not candidates, and can accept unlimited contributions (the line separating issues from candidates is fuzzy)

Pro-politicking ed reformers routinely set up a full array of such groups and solicit contributions for

each. In this way, they can collect unlimited funds from many donors for different purposes. Having mastered the nitty-gritty of political money, these reformers have been trying to convince their hesitant colleagues to join in and pony up.

Wary of Politics? Get Over It

On May 12, 2010, six reform leaders made their pitch to a roomful of funders, consultants, and staffers of nonprofits at the annual “summit” of the New Schools Venture Fund. The panel was called “[Political Savvy: Guidebook for a New Landscape](#).” Speakers included executives from Green Dot Public [charter] Schools (Gates, \$9.7 million, 2006-2007), Bellwether Education Partners (Gates, \$951,800 in 2011), Hope Street Group (Gates, \$875,000 in 2008-2009), Stand for Children (as noted above, \$5.2 million from Gates, 2003-20011), Democrats for Education Reform (a PAC), and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation (one of the largest ed reform funders, nonetheless a Gates grantee, \$3.6 million, 2010).

Stand for Children’s Jonah Edelman—who has turned his nonprofit into a political machine with prodigious fundraising capability and offices in eleven states—articulated the afternoon’s main themes: “We’re not using money for political purposes almost at all in this movement. If one percent of the money that’s going into charter schools went into politics and elections in the support of education reform, we would end up with way more progress for the movement.” Later, he exhorted, “And if you search your heart and you feel uncomfortable using certain tools, get over it.” He also addressed the legal issue: “It really needs to be ‘by any means necessary,’ and you can do a lot legally. What you can’t do legally in terms of electioneering, that’s where partnerships come in.” Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform (another robust political outfit with affiliates around the country), offered more specific advice: “Find more creative lawyers. We need them [ed reform nonprofits] to fire all of their lawyers that tell them ‘no’ all the time, if they have traditional 501(c)3 lawyers....”

Another of Williams’s comments reveals what is so misguided about this brand of education reform: “I think charter schools should be paying advocacy organizations for their advocacy work out of their per pupil dollars. If you think of running a school as running a business, any sound business is going to allocate right off the bat a certain percentage of their funding towards lobbying, advocacy work.”

But why think of running a school as running a business? Striving for efficiency is one thing—a good thing in many human endeavors, including school administration. But the analogy doesn’t hold beyond that: a school’s “bottom line” is not measured in dollars of profit; it shouldn’t waste resources on winning “market share” away from other schools. And why should charter schools pay for advocacy out of per-pupil dollars? Those are taxpayer dollars meant for those children’s education; the students “carry” those dollars away from a regular public school and give them to a charter school.

Williams’s position is self-serving: the per-pupil “fee” for advocacy would go to him and others among the multitude of salaried ed reform advocates. This problem of self-interest goes far beyond dunning kids for advocacy dollars. The ed reform movement has turned itself into an industry—an industry made up of scores of nonprofit groups of every size that operate locally, statewide, and nationally. They employ hundreds of people, many at high salaries (Williams’s 2010 salary was over \$265,000); they rake in money from private foundations, wealthy individuals, and government. (As critics note, George Bush’s signature ed reform program, No Child Left Behind, quickly became No Consultant Left Behind.) The nonprofit ed reform industry has a growth model: the more of its agenda that becomes law, the greater the demand for personnel to design, implement, study, and revise government mandated programs. To opponents, this looks like a racket. For ed reformers, it’s only, and always, about “helping children.”

It Takes a Bundle: The New School Board

In one model of democracy, local school board elections would be genuinely local. With a few hundred dollars, a stack of lawn signs, time to ring doorbells, and one or two endorsements, you could win a position of importance in your community: a say in how children would be educated and how a sizable amount of public money would be spent. In the real world until recently, only teachers unions and the Christian Right paid much attention to these elections (the Christian Right recognized their importance as a political stepping stone some thirty-five years ago); few citizens bothered to vote. Now the ed reformers have jumped in, turning school board races into battles requiring hundreds of thousands of dollars per candidate and outside operatives. This sabotages both rootedness in the community and access. A potential forum for grassroots democracy is lost.

Consider the November 1, 2011 school board race in Denver. Three candidates ran as a “reform slate” for the three available seats on the seven-member board. Colorado doesn’t limit contributions in school board elections, so money from the ed reform movement and corporate CEOs poured in.

According to the final tallies posted on [Colorado’s Campaign Finance Disclosure website](#), the reform slate took in \$633,807 (an average of \$211,269 per candidate). Just six donors—including executives in the oil, health-care, construction, and financial industries—accounted for \$293,000 of the total. One of them, Strata Capital president Henry Gordon, told the [Colorado Statesman \(October 17, 2011\)](#) that he wasn’t familiar with the candidates when he gave the slate \$75,000 but simply complied with the request of another major donor. The market approach to ed reform appeals to business leaders in general. Depending on their industry, some of them also stand to gain from reform-generated contracts.

STAND FOR Children (headquartered in Portland, Oregon) gave the reform slate \$88,511 in “non-monetary” contributions of staff support and canvassing services. When an outside organization hires and pays for staff and vote solicitors and then “donates” their work to a candidate, the work looks like grassroots organizing but isn’t. It is “astroturfing”—[a term the late U.S. Senator Lloyd Bentsen is believed to have coined in 1985](#). Astroturfing is political activity designed to appear unsolicited, autonomous, and community-rooted without actually being so.

Astroturfing is the modus operandi of the ed reform movement. Contributions of staff and services skyrocketed in Denver in 2011. Two years earlier, for example, the candidate who is now the pro-reform school board president received just \$310 in non-monetary contributions. In 2011, in addition to the \$88,511 from Stand for Children, the reform slate took in \$34,231 in mostly non-monetary contributions from a 501(c)4 group called Great Schools for Great Kids ([Education News Colorado, December 2, 2011](#)). The original source of this money isn’t clear—501(c)4s are not required to disclose donors. But the record shows that Great Schools for Great Kids transferred money to a super PAC that has the same registered agent and office suite as a Stand for Children affiliate. The money sloshes around.

The six other candidates in the nonpartisan race raised a total of \$212,973 (an average of \$35,495 per candidate). This, too, seems like a lot of money for a school board race, and yet, on a per candidate basis, the reform slate took in six times as much money as opponents did. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association endorsed two candidates. One of them received \$71,240 from the union in monetary and non-monetary donations; the other received \$40,720. According to the [Denver Post \(December 2, 2011\)](#), the union spent another \$86,000 through a committee called Delta 4.0 on mailers to advocate for the two candidates. Labor unions [501(c)5s in the IRS code] have tax exempt status, as do business associations and political campaign organizations. Unlike ed reformers backed by private

fundings, however, the teachers' unions are mass organizations with established local affiliates and elected leaders accountable to dues-paying members. Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, teachers unions are tied to schools, students, parents, and communities through their members.

Two of the three Denver reform candidates won; the third lost by only 142 votes to the union-endorsed incumbent. The deluge of money certainly helped the reformers retain their four-to-three majority on the board. Equally important, the ed reform operation reached a pivotal goal: to eclipse the longstanding power of the teachers' unions in the political arena. The expense and acrimony of the race prompted a Democratic state representative to re-propose spending limits. Unfortunately, after *Citizens United*, limits can end up funneling even more money into the web of political committees, where it's harder to track and where individual donors can remain anonymous.

Denver wasn't the only absurdly expensive school board race in 2011. For other examples, [click here](#).

The Company They Keep

Ed reformers liven up their websites with photographs of happy-looking school children, many of them minorities: the kids are busy at work or smiling into the camera. Meanwhile, their self-appointed benefactors ally with politicians who are slashing school budgets, cutting social services and benefits, gutting jobs programs, undercutting health-care reform, pummeling public sector unions, and passing laws that make it harder for the children's parents to vote. The disconnect between what ed reformers claim to be doing for low-income children and what they actually bring about boggles the mind.

The poster child for this moral disconnect is former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor and ed reform celebrity Michelle Rhee. Rhee resigned her D.C. post in October 2010 after her boss, Mayor Adrian Fenty, failed in his reelection bid. Within weeks, Rhee had set up a 501(c)4 advocacy organization called StudentsFirst; she announced a five-year fundraising goal of \$1 billion. Rhee explained the purpose of her project this way (*Daily Beast/Newsweek*, December 6, 2010):

When you think about how things happen in our country—how laws get passed or policies are made—they happen through the exertion of influence. From the National Rifle Association to the pharmaceutical industry to the tobacco lobby, powerful interests put pressure on our elected officials and government institutions to sway or stop change. Education is no different.

Rhee had a hectic first year. She started 2011 with gigs as ed reform policy advisor to three conservative Republican governors: Florida's Rick Scott, Wisconsin's Scott Walker, and Ohio's John Kasich. Walker and Kasich provoked mass protests in their respective states by pushing through laws that rolled back not only the salaries and pensions of public sector workers (including teachers) but also their union rights. Rhee came under fire for helping to shape the teacher-related provisions of the laws. She tried to wash her hands of the matter by saying that she didn't work on collective bargaining issues and didn't endorse everything in the laws. But during a [March 5, 2011 interview on Fox News](#), she asserted that unions "don't have a place in getting involved in policies, and so I think that the move to try to limit what they bargain over is an incredibly important one."

NO ONE knows how much money Rhee has raised so far or from whom: at this writing, the tax returns haven't been filed, and she keeps her donors anonymous (although Rupert Murdoch is rumored to have given \$50 million). Regardless, Rhee made a splashy debut as a high-rolling lobbyist. Her lobbying entity in Michigan, called United for Children Advocacy DBA StudentsFirst, spent \$951,018 from January through July 2011 to influence the content of ed reform legislation. According to the [Michigan](#)

[Campaign Finance Network](#), this made Rhee the biggest spending lobbyist in the state. She accounted for nearly half of the 11.6 percent increase in total lobbying spending compared to the same period in 2010. The state's largest teachers union, the Michigan Education Association, ranked sixth, spending \$324,197.

Rhee also set up a super PAC in Michigan called Parents and Teachers for Putting Students First. It contributed \$73,000 of its \$155,000 bankroll to oppose the recall of Paul Scott, Republican chair of the state House Education Committee. Scott voted to cut K-12 spending while advancing ed reform bills. According to the *Flint Journal* (January 1, 2012), the Michigan Education Association contributed \$140,000 to support the recall. Scott raised almost double that amount. Rhee's major allies in this battle included the right-wing billionaire couple Dick and Betsy DeVos (his father co-founded Amway). The DeVos family has funded education privatization efforts around the country since 1990; they are among the biggest promoters of vouchers (per-pupil public funds that students can withdraw from the public system and use to pay for private schools, including religious schools); they also fund Christian Right schools. The recall effort succeeded by 197 votes.

[In New Jersey, Rhee connected with two hedge-fund managers](#)—David Tepper, a Democrat, and Alan Fournier, a Republican. The duo had recently joined the club of no-expertise-in-education billionaires dedicated to changing public schools. In March 2011, Tepper and Fournier launched a 501(c)4 called Better Education for Kids, Inc., and a super PAC called Better Education for New Jersey Kids, Inc. During the summer of 2011, the super PAC spent about \$1 million on TV and radio commercials to promote Republican Governor Chris Christie's ed reform program. In the fall, the super PAC gave \$400,000 to support four pro-reform candidates for state Assembly: two, both Democrats, won; the two Republicans lost. Since then, the 501(c)4 has been offering New Jersey teachers \$100 gift certificates to participate in private meetings about teacher evaluations. Tepper and Fournier's super PAC and 501(c)4, it turns out, constitute the New Jersey branch of Rhee's StudentsFirst. The ed reform network expands while remaining knit together by money and the strength of the moral crusade.

Jammed Down Their Throats: An Inside Story

Hubris is a core characteristic of today's ed reformers. Of necessity, it informs their politicking. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the ed-world scandal that Stand for Children's Jonah Edelman created (his name reappears because he's a prime mover of the political strategy). At a session of the Aspen Ideas Festival on June 28, 2011, Edelman told his story of how the Illinois chapter of Stand, under his direction, shaped the state's education reform bill and helped get it through the legislature. A video of Edelman's presentation went viral on the Web, causing great embarrassment for Illinois lawmakers and teachers' unions. They promptly denounced him and tried to correct the record. Edelman made a public apology, and Stand's Illinois chapter appointed a new, if nominal, director. Still, Edelman's account is extremely useful for understanding the attitude and style of ed reformers.

The Illinois law, which the governor signed on June 13, 2011, makes it easier to fire tenured teachers and revoke certification, eliminates seniority as the top consideration in layoffs, bases teacher evaluations on to-be-finalized measures of student performance, gives Chicago's school administrators the unilateral power to lengthen the school day and year, and makes a strike by Chicago's teachers nearly impossible.

Maneuvering for the law began with the 2010 elections to the state legislature. Chicago Democrat Michael Madigan, speaker of the Illinois House for twenty-seven years, was running again. Edelman had raised more than \$3.5 million for Stand's Illinois war chest, mostly from Chicago's wealthiest families, Republicans as well as Democrats. Since the substance of the story is in Edelman's telling, here are excerpts from his talk (for the complete video, [click here](#)):

...So our analysis was he's [Madigan] still going to be in power, and as such the raw politics were that we should tilt toward him, and so we interviewed thirty-six candidates in targeted races....I'm being quite blunt here. The individual candidates were essentially a vehicle to execute a political objective, which was to tilt toward Madigan. The press never picked up on it. We endorsed nine individuals, and six of them were Democrats, three Republicans....

...That was really a show of—indication to him that we could be a new partner to take the place of the Illinois Federation of Teachers. That was the point. Luckily, it never got covered that way. That wouldn't have worked well in Illinois. Madigan is not particularly well liked.

[Stand for Children, which gave \$610,000 to its endorsed candidates, was one of the biggest contributors in the election.]...After the election, we went back to Madigan...and I confirmed the support [for Stand's legislative proposal]....The next day he created an Education Reform Commission, and his political director called to ask for our suggestions who should be on it....In addition, we hired eleven lobbyists, including four of the absolute best insiders and seven of the best minority lobbyists, preventing the unions from hiring them. We raised \$3 million for our political action committee. That's more money than either of the unions have in their political action committees.

And so essentially what we did in a very short period of time was shift the balance of power. And I can tell you, there was a palpable sense of concern, if not shock, on the part of the teachers unions in Illinois that Speaker Madigan had changed allegiance and that we had clear political capability to potentially jam this proposal down their throats the same way pension reform had been jammed down their throats six months earlier.

...And so over the course of three months, with Advance Illinois [another ed reform group, \$1.8 million from Gates in 2008] taking the negotiating lead...and Advance and Stand working in lockstep...they [the union negotiators] essentially gave away every single provision related to teacher effectiveness that we had proposed.

...We fully expected [on the collective bargaining issues] that our collaborative problem-solving of three months would end, and we would have an impasse and go to war, and we were prepared. We had money raised for radio ads, and our lobbyists were ready. Well, to our surprise, and with [Chicago's newly elected mayor] Rahm Emanuel's involvement behind the scenes, we were able to split the IEA [Illinois Education Association, a statewide union] from the Chicago Teachers Union.

...So the Senate backed it [the bill] 59 to zero, and then the Chicago Teachers Union leader started getting pushback from her membership for a deal that really, probably, wasn't from their perspective strategic. She backed off for a little while, but the die had been cast. She had publicly been supportive. So we did some face-saving technical fixes in a separate bill, but the House approved it 112 to one.

... We've been happy to dole out plenty of credit, and now it makes it hard for folks leading unions in other states to say these types of reforms are terrible because their colleagues in Illinois just said these are great. So our hope and our expectation is to use this as a catalyst to very quickly make similar changes in other very entrenched states.

Astroturf—Says Who?

Jonah Edelman's exploits offended not only Illinois legislators and unionists but also African American

clergy in Chicago. BlackCommentator.com posted an account by David A. Love on July 29, 2011 ([available here](#)):

Edelman attended a community meeting of black Chicago clergy with what observers have called a "slick dog and pony show." ...According to Rev. Robin Hood, executive director of Clergy Committed to Community, SFC [Stand] wasn't the least bit interested in the concerns of the black community. "They were interested in getting people to see [the pro-charter film] *Waiting for Superman*....I found they were anti-union when we met with Stand for Children. It was all about money." ...Although SFC spread around a lot of money in Chicago communities, Rev. Hood emphasized that not one of the pastors in his group would take any of it.

The Edelman Affair is a sorry tale, not only because Jonah is the son of civil-rights leader Marian Wright Edelman and poverty analyst Peter Edelman, but also because Stand started out as an authentic grassroots organization in Oregon. When the scandal broke, longtime activists who had quit or become inactive "spoke out" online. Their reports are remarkably similar. The following is from an open letter to Edelman from Tom Olson, a decade-long volunteer and local leader, posted on the [Parents Across America website on July 22, 2011](#). Olson and his wife had cancelled their sustaining memberships fifteen months earlier:

[I]n 2009, a number of us began to observe a serious erosion of your commitment to true grassroots operations....One of the "reforms" you and your staff began to tout was a call for legislation to create more "flexibility" for schools. This was obviously a thinly disguised attempt to erode negotiated teacher contract agreements and to create more charter schools. It was clearly modeled after some Colorado legislation you had pushed as you shifted to demanding attention to a national agenda supported mostly by corporate and Wall Street millionaires.

Dropping grassroots activism in favor of the ed reformers' top-down strategy put Stand in sync with the rest of the movement. Ed reformers rarely concede, let alone lament, that they deal mostly in astroturf paid for by wealthy whites. So a frank assessment by Jeanne Allen, founder of the Center for Education Reform, merits attention. In 2010 CER received \$275,000 from Gates to launch the Media Bullpen, a baseball-themed website that rates education reporting according to reform criteria. (I gladly disclose that my article in *Dissent*, Winter 2011, "Got Dough: How Billionaires Rule Our Schools," [received a "strike out," the lowest rating](#).) Allen [posted the following online](#) on December 19, 2011:

The main reason that poor and minority communities fail to engage in our movement has very little to do with elected Republicans or Democrats and everything to do with us. As a movement (and I've seen this first-hand for more than twenty years), we believe advocacy is when a professional shows up in their friend the majority leader's office and has a good meeting....Real grassroots efforts are on the ground, neighborhood-by-neighborhood, long-term, sustainable education efforts to engage and fortify REAL people, to be REAL voices. Neither ConnCan [flagship branch of 50CAN, \$2.4 million from Gates in 2011], nor Stand, nor any of those who claim to do grassroots do it....It's the failure of people who love and advance an issue through their own narrow (albeit powerful) lenses and fail to recognize that the marketing and lobbying firms they hire are clueless about what is really necessary to truly make progress.

Endgame

A strong democracy requires a public education system, one that is excellent throughout and open to all. The United States failed even to aim for this standard until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*

Supreme Court decision outlawed racial segregation in schools. Since then, since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (which directed federal funds to low-income schools), the nation has made progress toward access and excellence. Too slowly, of course, but progress nonetheless (see [Richard Rothstein's March 8, 2011 analysis for the Economic Policy Institute](#)). Ed reformers ignore the data, claiming that poor and minority children are no better educated now than thirty or forty years ago. In fact, progress has slowed only in the last decade, since No Child Left Behind was implemented and the reform agenda gained traction. Other factors may play a role, but the ed reformers certainly haven't improved progress.

The line of battle for the future of public education is clear. Allied on one side are free-market zealots in the business community, pro-voucher social conservatives, and this peculiar breed of reformers whose political movers are often wealthy, private-school educated, white, male, and under the age of fifty. They are the junior plutocracy, strivers whose do-good goal twenty years ago would have been a seat on the board of the municipal art museum. They are typically clueless about public education. On the other side are public school students, their families, their teachers, and believers in the link between democracy and public education. The first side has money, powerful political connections, and an infrastructure of nonprofit organizations with paid staff. The other side has this: the ability to become a true grassroots movement. This looks like an unequal contest. But with sustained effort, citizen activists at the grassroots can trump hired guns on astroturf.

The 1 Percent for School Board

Louisiana: The usually low-key elections for state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education cost well over \$1 million in the fall of 2011. [According to state campaign finance data](#), a pro-reform funding group called the Alliance for Better Classrooms took in more than \$750,000—40 percent of it from construction mogul Lane Grisby and family members (\$200,000) and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's trust (\$100,000). The state's most important business lobby, the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, gave pro-reform candidates at least \$250,000, according to [Stateline](#), a news service sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Gates, \$1.4 million to the Pew Research Center, 2011). The pro-reformers won six of the seven races.

Wake County, NC: The fall 2011 school board elections were the most expensive in the county's history, costing more than \$500,000, according to an early tally by the [News & Observer website](#) (November 8, 2011). At stake was a nationally acclaimed program that uses busing to achieve economic—and thereby racial—diversity. In 2009 multimillionaire conservative Art Pope (profiled in the [New Yorker, October 10, 2011](#)) spent heavily to get a Republican majority elected that would dismantle the program. The board promptly devised a plan to do that. The backlash against Pope, his allies, and the board produced a Democratic sweep of the five open seats in 2011. This vote for school integration made news around the country.

Correction: The original version of this article stated, "Three candidates ran as a 'reform slate' for the three open seats on the seven-member board." Three candidates did run on a "reform slate," however only two of the seats were open; the other was contested by an incumbent.

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