



New education advocacy group plans to target charter schools

By [Eric Boehm](#) / January 16, 2014

Backed by a progressive philanthropist and run by the former head of a teachers' union, a new education advocacy group announced Tuesday it would fight to change the narrative on education in America.

READING, WRITING AND ACTIVISM: Modeled after MoveOn.org and other progressive groups, Integrity in Education will challenge school choice groups like Students First.

For **Integrity in Education**, which will operate as both charitable nonprofit and a political nonprofit, that means challenging the Obama Administration and taking on school choice organizations. The group's leaders say they want to push back against the corporate interests that are to blame for problems in the public school system.

"For too long, education policy has been driven by a small group of people connected to the corporations who can most directly profit from it," said **Sabrina Joy Stevens**, executive director of Integrity in Education. "Our goal here is to get clear about what exactly is going on."

But take a look behind the messaging and the real goal seems to be protecting traditional public schools from competition created by charter schools and other forms of educational choice.

Stevens is a former teacher from **Denver** and former staffer for the **American Federation of Teachers**, a national teachers' union.

She said the group was not directly tied to any national or local unions, but said it would work with teachers, parents and students to support traditional public schools. She denied the group had any ties with national or local teachers unions, but said it would be "working with people who agree with us on this issue and want to change the narrative around education."

Stevens said the organization would be modeled after **MoveOn.org** and other small donor-driven progressive advocacy groups.

But the group is "categorically against" for-profit schools, and plans to use aggressive media and social media campaigns to stop for-profit education, Stevens said.

Deborah Sagner, a progressive philanthropist who is helping bankroll the new organization, said school choice advocacy groups like **Students First** — run by **Michelle Rhea**, the former head of the Washington, D.C., school system — were “scheming to ensure that state and federal education policies promote their selfish interests instead of strengthening the common good.”

Previously, Sagner raised \$500,000 for Obama’s re-election.

Francisco Castillo, national press secretary for Students First, welcomed a debate on the merits of the new group’s ideas.

“To the extent they want to talk about policy solutions for kids, great, but it seems like they’re more interested in personal attacks and distractions,” he said.

Jason Bedrick, education policy analyst for the **Cato Institute**, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., said groups like Integrity in Education shouldn’t be afraid of for-profit schools or competition in education.

“I don’t think profit is something that has to be against the public good,” he said.

When groups say charter schools are destroying traditional public schools, they mean they are costing traditional public schools some of their budget because kids are choosing charters that offer better outcomes, he said.

Despite their progressive backing, Integrity in Education took shots at the Obama administration over recent appointments in the **Department of Education**.

Stevens said the group was seeking information from the **Department of Education**, via a **Freedom of Information** request, that would uncover corporate influence in national education policy.

“It’s alarming that our initial research reveals what looks like a revolving door between corporate interest groups and the department,” Stevens said.

By Wednesday, one day after the national media conference call to announce the new organization, the group was already on the attack in **New Jersey**. Stevens issued a statement to the press Wednesday morning criticizing **Gov. Chris Christie** for expanding the use of charter schools in the state.

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