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## Who's behind the "A" grade for Dudley's education plan?

*By Kenneth Libby of Portland, Oregon. Ken is a Democratic activist and education policy blogger. Learn more at his blog, [Schools Matter](#)*

Recently, two education advocacy organizations issued a report grading gubernatorial candidates in 37 states. The two groups, Education Reform Now (ERN) and the Education Equality Project (EEP) gave Republican Chris Dudley an "A" while shaming Democratic John Kitzhaber with an "F." As [Jeff Mapes at the Oregonian noted](#), these grades were given out by "Obama's education reform crowd." It's fair to say these grades could confuse the public, or, as Mapes also noted, could be used by the Dudley campaign during Obama's upcoming visit.

Dudley's K-12 school reform agenda includes: expanding charter and cyber schools; loosening the teacher credentialing program; ending social promotion for struggling 3rd graders; grading schools with letter grades A - F; expanding school choice; and, although it's not explicitly stated in his materials, paying teachers or evaluating teachers based on test scores. None of this has a research base that suggests it will dramatically - or even incrementally - improve our public school system.

But there's more to this story than meets the eye. How did two groups that are allegedly left-leaning give Dudley an "A" for his education reform agenda and Kitzhaber an "F"? To begin with, we need to look at education policy and politics in the run-up to the 2008 election.

### **The Divide:**

As the campaign reared into high gear, two distinct camps emerged in the realm of education reform: the Education Equality Project and the Broader, Bolder Approach. The former group advocated for merit-pay for teachers, the expansion of charter schools, an emphasis on testing, and school choice; the latter emphasized early childhood education spending, access to healthcare, social supports, and non-academic programs in addition to school-level reforms. These two camps could be considered emblematic of an emerging split within the Democratic party when it comes to public education: those looking to apply business principles and market-based reforms in an attempt to improve schools, and those interested in pairing social reforms with school-level improvements.

A key player in this split is a relatively new political action committee, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). Founded in 2007 by Whitney Tilson, Ravenel Boykin Curry IV, Charles Ledley, and John Petry - all

NYC-based hedge fund managers - DFER is a supporter of charter schools, high-stakes testing, vouchers, alternative teacher certification routes, privatization, and school choice. These reforms have long been considered conservative reform proposals, but DFER, ERN, and EEP - along with major philanthropies - have tipped the scales enough to get these ideas into Democratic conversations about education reform.

While the Oregonian's Mapes is certainly correct that EEP has a few ties to the Obama administration, the authors of this report actually have much stronger ties to hedge fund managers and right-wing ideologues. As I'll explain below, DFER, ERN, and EEP are actually all closely-related organizations, and their education reform platform is heavy on ideology - particularly the free-market variety - rather than evidence.

### **EEP, ERN, and DFER:**

ERN is the 501c3 branch of DFER. DFER's executive director, Joe Williams, previously was the head of ERN, and continues to serve on ERN's board of directors. Incidentally, Williams is also the treasurer of EEP and, as [this article](#) explains, is the guy to talk to if you're interested in getting connect with the NYC hedge fund crowd. Previously, Williams also wrote for the American Enterprise Institute and Fordham Institute, two right-wing think tanks involved in education reform.

A number of DFER's board members and donors have links to conservative and libertarian organizations. Peter Ackerman and his wife [donated \\$10k to DFER](#) back in July of 2007. Previously, Ackerman served on the board of the Cato Institute. Another Cato board member, Jeff Yass, recently teamed up with two investment partners to [donate \\$1.5 million](#) through DFER's PA committee to pro-charter/voucher Senator Anthony Williams, a Democrat seeking his party's ticket in the race for governor (he lost). Additionally, DFER board member Kevin Chavous is on the board of the Center for Education Reform (founded by Jeanne Allen, formerly of the Heritage Foundation, and funded largely by the conservative Walmart Family Foundation). Chavous, along with DFER co-founder Ravenel Curry IV, is also on the board of the Alliance for School Choice, another conservative advocacy organization supported largely by the Walton Family Foundation. Corey Booker, previously on the Alliance's board, currently serves on the board of both EEP and DFER. ERN's previous executive director, Amy Wilkins, is also on the board of EEP. Finally, Ravenel Curry III, a [board member](#) at the Manhattan Institute, donated \$50,000 to ERN in 2007.

### **Policy:**

As explained above, there's an emerging faction of the Democratic party that shares many reform proposals with their conservative and libertarian counterparts. The evidence behind their (largely) market-based policy proposals - including some of those pushed by the Obama administration, unfortunately - do not have a solid research base. The [most comprehensive charter school study](#) showed only 17% were better than comparable neighborhood schools, 37% were worse, and the remaining 46% were roughly the same. This isn't to say charter schools are entirely worthless and not worth using as one strategy to improve education, but it certainly means they're no silver bullet nor can they be the primary driver of education reform. In Oregon and nationwide, charter students account for only a few percent of the total public school enrollment, so the real focus must be on traditional public schools if we're to improve the quality of education for the majority of students.

While Kitzhaber proposes some reform ideas that could certainly improve traditional public schools, Dudley is resigned mostly to evaluating schools (likely based on test scores and possibly a few other measures) and assigning them a letter grade. This idea is supposed to work in tandem with expanded school choice. Parents, armed with the letter grades, could choose from a variety of schools in their area and would presumably leave low-quality schools for higher-performing options. In this education marketplace, the low-performing schools would presumably go out of business and the stronger ones would thrive (and, if possible, replicate themselves to serve more students). There are a number of problems with this theory of change: there simply aren't enough seats in high-performing schools to accommodate students that would flee low-performing schools; the opening and closing of schools can wreak havoc on a community; and existing evidence on the efficacy of competition between schools doesn't indicate this is a promising way to boost student achievement. Kitzhaber understands

these limitations and avoids pitting our schools against each other or grading them based on a narrow measure of student achievement.

As for evaluating teachers based on student test scores, another favorite reform idea of the emerging Democratic wing and traditional conservatives/libertarians, non-partisan researchers have expressed concerns about using this as a strategy to improve schools. Earlier this year, the National Research Council and National Academy of Education [published their own report](#) of a workshop held to discuss issues around merit-pay tied to test scores, especially the growth models touted by DFER/ERN/EEP as a solution to weeding out bad teachers. The Academy's findings certainly don't support using test scores and growth models as a primary driver of teacher evaluations, but the aforementioned reform organizations have pressed for it anyways. There are two reasons to be concerned about using test scores and growth models to evaluate teachers: firstly, this would likely encourage teaching to the test (which would be fine if we had excellent tests, but we don't) and further narrow the curriculum, and statisticians have expressed concerns about the reliability of the test scores and growth models. More recently, two researchers from Mathematica Policy Research published a paper, [Error Rates in Measuring Teacher and School Performance Based on Student Test Score Gains](#), which suggested these models would mis-identify "average" teachers as "poor" teachers 25% of the time (with three years worth of data; error rates jump to 35% with only one year's worth of data). Those error rates are not only unfair to teachers, but they may drive away high-quality candidates that might otherwise enter the teaching profession.

### Where Does Dudley Fit In?

Dudley may have received an A grade from an organization walking hand-in-hand with a collection of right-wing organizations and funded by hedge fund managers, but that certainly doesn't mean he has the best interests of children in mind. The EEP/ERN report, in fact, gives a higher grade to the Republican candidate in 15 races; Democrats receive a higher grade in only 4 states, the independent in one state, and the candidates were given the same grade in the other 17 races. Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, for instance, receives an A grade despite the disgusting stance she takes on immigration reform and the [banning of ethnic studies](#) in her state. Her grade is a prime example of how these organizations fail to see how education reform unfolds in a dynamic socio-political-economic environment: clearly, some of Arizona's recent legislation will have a negative impact on minority students in her state, but the ERN/EEP report ignores this when grading the governors. Nowhere does Dudley suggest Oregon needs a better and more stable school funding formula (ie revamping the kicker); instead, he's calling for tax cuts for the wealthiest Oregonians. Dudley does deserve credit for emphasizing early childhood education (as does Kitzhaber) and encouraging physical fitness, but the rest of his plan would push Oregon in a direction that is unlikely to lead to improvements in our public schools.

The clear choice in this race, particularly for those interested in strengthening our public schools, is John Kitzhaber.

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