

Super PACs and school reform

A pro-charter group – started by Trump’s nominee for education secretary – has given millions to Pennsylvania lawmakers.

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There's an old saying for those who want to understand political influence: Follow the money.

In the case of Harrisburg’s interest in the governance of Philadelphia’s schools, that trail leads from pro-charter political action committees to the millions of dollars they donate to support the campaigns of state legislators and leaders.

Super PACs – political action committees that can raise unlimited amounts of money for causes but cannot donate directly to a campaign – play key roles in decisions that affect Philadelphia’s school system, from input on the wording of proposed legislation to financial support for pro-reform candidates, .

The pro-charter super PAC called Students First PA – which was started by President-elect Donald Trump’s pick for education secretary, Betsy DeVos – drew attention during the 2014 election cycle by donating a total of \$7.6 million to groups supporting at least 10 Republican and Democratic candidates around the state. Students First PA raises most of its money from just four local millionaires and American Federation for Children, an organization run by DeVos’ out-of-state billionaire family.

Proponents of the current campaign finance system often say that the super PACs are advocating policies developed by independent research organizations, known as think tanks. But the think tanks and the super PACs advocating charter expansion are often run by the same people, and their money often comes from the same donors.

No one illustrates that relationship better than DeVos, who established Students First PA and who still runs its national parent organization, American Federation for Children. Jeffrey Yass, one of the local millionaires who donates to Students First PA, is also on the board of the Cato Institute – a think tank whose studies have been cited to explain votes on charter expansion by Pennsylvania legislators who received donations from Students First.

Since its inception in 2010, Students First has given more than \$200,000 to PACS supporting seven state senators on the 11-member education committee alone, plus more than \$5 million to support Democratic State Senate Whip Anthony Williams in his failed gubernatorial primary campaign.

The most cash given to a member of the committee other than Williams was \$111,500, to PACs supporting Republican Joseph Scarnati. Although most of the recipients were Republicans, \$45,000 from Students First went to the minority chairman of the committee, Democrat Andy Dinniman.

The super PAC also contributed to the PAC supporting the campaign of former Gov. Tom Corbett, a Republican.

Students First has donated nearly \$300,000 to support the campaigns of seven state representatives on the House education committee, with Jim Christiana, a Republican, receiving the most, and \$26,500 going to the majority chairman, Republican Stan Saylor. The super PAC also contributed \$76,000 to the failed primary opponent of Minority Chairman Jim Roebuck, a Democrat who has never received money from Students First.

The super PAC targets broader leadership positions, too. Students First gave \$70,000 to PACs supporting Speaker of the House Mike Turzai, a Republican, and \$100,000 to the newly elected attorney general, Democrat Josh Shapiro.

Turzai went on to sponsor two school choice bills in 2011, one of which was introduced by Christiana, the biggest recipient of Students First money in the House.

PACs for other leaders in the Pennsylvania House and Senate received smaller amounts, including Republicans Pat Browne and Bill Adolph Jr. and Democrats Mike O’Pake and Lisa Boscola. Students First also donated \$15,000 to a PAC supporting State Treasurer Joe Torsella’s campaign.

DeVos and Pa. legislation

A Center for Public Integrity report described the DeVos family and its business interests as the fifth-largest contributor in the 2003-04 election cycle, with every dime going to Republicans. The Dick & Betsy DeVos Foundation is also one of three conservative foundations responsible for funding the Citizens United legal challenge, which resulted in the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that created the current super PAC system.

DeVos created Students First PA in 2010 to promote legislation that would create a school voucher system in Pennsylvania. The bills that Students First pushes are often written by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative organization that brings corporations and think tanks together to develop proposed legislation for states. ALEC’s biggest financial backers are brothers Charles and David Koch, businessmen who contribute millions to conservative causes.

One of the biggest funders of ALEC’s Education Task Force is the DeVos family, and Betsy DeVos’ American Federation for Children is a member of the task force.

Larry Feinberg, co-chairman of the Keystone State Education Commission, said of ALEC: “They put out sample bills, suggesting language, and if you look at any school-choice bills, the language is cut-and-paste. The notion of opportunity scholarships, the bills about alternative authorizers, creating an opportunity school district – almost all of that comes directly from ALEC.”

In 2011, the PAC hired BrabenderCox, a major Republican public relations firm, to help organize a rally in support of pro-voucher legislation in Harrisburg that was co-written by State Sen. Anthony Williams.

Students First collaborated on the rally with the tea party organization FreedomWorks.

Feinberg said that the Pennsylvania voucher bill used language straight out of a template written by ALEC.

Dark money

Over the years, DeVos' organizations have run afoul of campaign finance laws. In 2008, one was fined \$5.2 million for violating Ohio election law in funneling money to pro-voucher, pro-charter legislative candidates.

DeVos' history prompted a Philadelphia City Council member to question her motives in accepting Trump's nomination to be the U.S. secretary of education.

“My first reaction is that I am surprised that somebody who is so closely associated with the corrupting influence of dark money in politics and backroom dealing wants to step out of the shadows and into the spotlight of public service and the scrutiny that comes with it,” said Councilwoman Helen Gym.

“She's meddled in Pennsylvania politics, but she is used to the privileges of the extremely wealthy and is not in tune with the millions of children and families under the care of her department. For that, we'll see a dramatic disconnect.”