

As Democrats aim to flip the House, a top lawmaker took \$600K from school choice donor trying to stop them

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The No. 2 Democrat in the Pennsylvania House has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars in political donations from a group that's funded at least \$3.5 million in ads targeting vulnerable Democratic colleagues in an election in which control of the chamber is seen as up for grabs.

House Minority Whip Jordan Harris, D-Philadelphia, raked in \$600,000 over the past two years from Students First, a political action committee that supports candidates for office who back school choice.

Those donations are an anomaly this cycle, as Students First, which has backed Democrats in the past, has instead given more than 90 percent of its dollars to conservative groups to protect Republican incumbents and attack Democrats in red-tinged districts.

Harris, an ally of charter schools with the votes to match, has made no apologies for accepting the donations, which he says he'll use to help his colleagues.

"You're damn right I'll take the money," Harris told the Capital-Star. "I took the money so I could level the playing field for Democrats."

Democrats, who are at a nine-seat disadvantage, are hopeful they can flip the Republican-controlled chamber for the first time in a decade this year.

Until Democrats do wrest control, it'll be impossible to increase education funding, pass new gun laws, or raise the minimum wage, Harris added.

"I don't have the luxury to sit on the sidelines and see what happens in this election, because when I sit on the sidelines, my community gets screwed," he said.

But complicating the road to a majority is the fact that about a dozen Democrats are in seats that President Donald Trump won in 2016, and could lose reelection, likely dooming any chance to turn the House blue.

Those lawmakers are among those who face a wave of ads and mailers financed, after at least one pit stop, by Students First.

“What’s ironic is they attack me, [and] they are attacking all western Pennsylvania Democrats, and falsely accuse us of siding with liberal Philadelphia politicians,” Rep. Frank Burns, a vulnerable Cambria County Democrat whose been targeted by such ads, told the Capital-Star. “Yet they’re the ones writing \$500,000 checks to liberal Philadelphia politicians.”

How exactly the money will be spent is still unclear, as Harris does not have to submit his pre-election campaign finance report until Oct. 23.

Harris said he had already provided \$400,000 to electing fellow Democrats, and would raise six figure sums before the election is over in three weeks, but did not provide specifics.

Public records reveal at least \$130,000 in donations to the House Democratic Campaign Committee, which works to elect Democrats and defend incumbents in the House. It is possible he has raised more by soliciting donations directly to the HDCC rather than donating the money itself.

Top dollar donor

In the past, Students First has backed both Democrats and Republicans. But as party lines in the debate over school choice have hardened in recent years, Students First donations have increasingly gone to Republican-aligned groups.

All told, the PAC has spent \$7.1 million from 2019 until Sept. 14, according to campaign finance filings with the Pennsylvania Department of State.

Democrats have received just a fraction of the campaign cash: about \$9 out of every \$100 that Students First has spent in the 2020 election cycle, a Capital-Star analysis concluded.

An email sent to an address on Students First’s website bounced, and a listed phone number was disconnected.

Most of Students First’s money comes from Jeff Yass, a billionaire stock trader who sits on the board of the libertarian Cato Institute, and who backed U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., in the 2016 GOP presidential primary.

For the past decade, Yass has donated to candidates — Republican and Democrat alike — who support providing public school students with access to charter schools and private schools.

In 2010, the group gave \$5 million to Philadelphia state Sen. Anthony Williams’ failed Democratic gubernatorial bid, according to the Philly Voice. In 2015, the group dropped another \$250,000 to fund a pro-Williams Super PAC during his failed mayoral run.

Students First has donated a further \$380,000 to Williams’ state Senate campaign committee, a Capital-Star analysis of campaign finance data found.

That financial benevolence has carried over to Williams’ protege, Harris.

When Harris initially ran for, and won a seat, in the state House in 2012, he received \$30,000 from Students First. Then, as a rank-and-file member, he received occasional checks. By 2018, the donations totaled to \$60,500.

But in November of that year, as part of a Philadelphia takeover of the House Democratic caucus, Harris was catapulted to whip, the Democratic second-in-command charged with maintaining party discipline on votes.

With the promotion came a new found financial interest from Yass and Students First. The PAC donated \$100,000 to Harris in 2019, before cutting him a \$500,000 check this summer.

That Aug. 6 donation of a half-million dollar check is 19 times more than the \$26,545 he raised through June 22 this year, according to his campaign finance reports.

Follow the money

There is a catch to Students First spending, however. The PAC does not always make direct contributions to Republicans. Instead, it funnels the money through one or more passthrough PACs before the dollars end up in conservative lawmakers' coffers.

For example, out of Students First's \$7.1 million in spending this election cycle, Citizens Alliance of Pennsylvania, a conservative group that primaries establishment Republicans, has received \$405,000.

Another group, Education Opportunity PAC, received \$72,000 from Students First — nearly 41 percent of its total contributions since 2019. The PAC is run by the Bravo Group, a Harrisburg lobbying firm that counts charter schools among its many clients.

Education Opportunity then turns around and spends its money on Democrats and Republicans — including Harris, fellow Philadelphia Democrats Sen. Vincent Hughes and Rep. Danilo Burgos, and House Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff, R-Centre.

But the single biggest beneficiary of Students First's cash since 2019 is Commonwealth Children's Choice Fund, a PAC managed by conservative operative Matt Brouillette.

Students First has given \$6 million to Children's Choice since 2019, or about four of every five dollars raised by Children's Choice.

Children's Choice then donated directly to such Republicans as former House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny, Rep. Andrew Lewis, R-Dauphin, and state Sen. Doug Mastriano, R-Franklin, and made its own donations to Education Opportunity PAC.

But the biggest recipient of Children's Choice dollars is Commonwealth Leaders Fund, which is also managed by Brouillette. Commonwealth Leaders has received \$3.9 million from Children's Choice.

Once the money reaches Commonwealth Leaders Fund, it is used to attack Democrats and puff up Republican candidates.

Playing both sides

Since June 30, the fund has targeted at least 15 separate races in both the House and Senate, attempting to tarnish both western Pennsylvania Democratic incumbents and Democratic challengers in south central Pennsylvania..

For example, the fund has spent \$33,000 in the last week on Facebook ads supporting Republican auditor general candidate Tim DeFoor, according to the Facebook Ad Library.

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At least four ads were directed at Cambria County Democrat Burns alone. He said the camouflage spending from Yass showed a need for campaign finance reform.

“It’s difficult to track this money. It’s funneled through different PACs and hard to follow,” Burns told the Capital-Star. “Instead of advocating for the issues they support, they simply want to buy the election of anyone who agrees with their issue.”

While Burns expressed familiarity with at least one of the donations to Harris, he did not criticize the Democratic leader for taking the money.

In fact, while a liberal political group linked to the state’s public sector unions highlighted the connection with unease, no Democrat would go on the record to criticize the donation.

Harris is a well known and vocal supporter of charter schools, telling the Capital-Star that “in my city, quality education includes charter schools.”

That mindset has shown in his votes. He’s sided with Republicans in the past to, for example, expand tax credits for private school scholarships, even when most of his colleagues were on the opposite side.

But Democratic lawmakers said they don’t look askance at Harris’s support from the charter lobby.

“If [Harris] has relationships with traditionally Republican organizations that are able to help our Democratic causes, that’s between him and them. It ain’t gonna change the way I vote,” Rep. Peter Schweyer, D-Lehigh, told the Capital-Star.

One person familiar with Democratic legislative politics, who requested anonymity to speak candidly, saw the move as more about inter-caucus politics than any one policy topic.

They argued that the donations from Students First were not about influencing Harris’ votes. Instead, the source said that the donations would let Harris make donations to his colleagues in hopes of swaying them in future leadership elections for majority leader or even House speaker.

But such an upward move would require a Democratic majority — the very reason, Harris argued, he “took money across the board,” from Students First to organized labor, “so we could elect a Democratic majority.”

Mustafa Rashed, a long time Philadelphia Democratic consultant and lobbyist, compared the donations to how some liberal-aligned interest groups deploy their money and endorsements in Pennsylvania.

From organized labor and trial lawyers to gun control groups and Planned Parenthood, all have, at times, given resources to Republican incumbents who support them.

However, Rashed noted, those donations are a zero sum game.

“When you support a Republican candidate, that is at the expense of a Democrat,” or vice versa, he said.