

Independent Weekly

Pope-funded groups and the dismantling of public education

by Bob Geary

One day into the 2011 General Assembly session and conservatives were celebrating their new power over education. "It's a joyous week in Raleigh!" Dallas Woodhouse said exultantly. The state director of Americans for Prosperity was busy welcoming his guests, who included Republican legislators, to a reception co-sponsored by AFP-NC and the John William Pope Civitas Institute.

Woodhouse crowed about how the N.C. Association of Educators was suddenly in retreat and then introduced the new House majority leader, Rep. Paul (Skip) Stam of Wake County. "He's a friend who's been with us from the beginning on charter schools," Woodhouse said.

Stam quickly endorsed the AFP's three charter school "principles": an unlimited number of charters; no minimum or maximum enrollments at the schools; and a separate licensing commission outside of the State Department of Public Instruction—even though charter schools are ostensibly public schools.

Then Stam turned to his own bill to create tax credits for parents who pay private school tuitions or homeschool their children. Always call them tax credits, he warned, chortling at this chicanery, because the phrase "tax credits" does better in the polls than "private school vouchers."

Within hours, video of Woodhouse, Stam and Sen. Neal Hunt, R-Wake, who spoke in favor of merit pay for teachers, was posted to The Locker Room, a blog with a conservative bent. The blog is maintained by the John Locke Foundation, an Art Pope-funded think tank in Raleigh.

But what of Art Pope? He was nowhere to be seen.

Present or not, Pope was the star of this show, the evening's events and cast of characters a virtual playbill of his growing influence over education policy in North Carolina and the tools he's used to achieve it: Locke, Civitas, AFP, the Republican Party—all beneficiaries of the Pope Foundation or Pope himself.

Indeed, Pope's self-image may well be reflected in a description of the humble man for whom the Locke Foundation's "E.A. Morris Fellowship for Emerging Leaders" is named.

E. A. Morris, who headed the giant Blue Bell Corp. in Greensboro, was "one of the founding fathers of the North Carolina conservative movement," the Locke website relates, "known for his leadership skills in his community and throughout North Carolina. [His] generosity extended to the support of

