

## **Outside Advocacy Groups Target Local School Board Elections: Campaign-cash impact felt close to home**

By Sean Cavanagh and Stephen Sawchuk May 23, 2012 *Education Week*

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When Jason McCarthy ran for a seat on the [Buffalo school board](#) two years ago, he drew support from friends and allies across his New York community. In his campaign two years ago, Mr. McCarthy received unsolicited contributions from outside education advocacy groups, including one associated with Democrats for Education Reform. He also drew the backing of an organization that was unfamiliar to voters in the city on the shores of Lake Erie—and unfamiliar to the candidate himself.

Mr. McCarthy never asked for financial help from Education Reform Now Advocacy. But he got it anyway. The group, which is affiliated with the national political action committee Democrats for Education Reform, or DFER, paid for tens of thousand dollars' worth of mailers and robocalls in support of him and two other Buffalo school board candidates. Mr. McCarthy, a 37-year-old who works in a restaurant and is a parks activist and a backer of charter schools, ended up winning his race.

The support provided in Buffalo by Education Reform Now Advocacy gives an example of how a new breed of national education groups, known for devoting money and organizational might to political campaigns and lobbying at the state level, also extends its reach into local school board elections.

The interests of organizations like DFER and another group that has been more active at the local level, Stand for Children, vary, depending on the setting.

In some school districts, their policy goals mirror those they have pursued in statehouses, which can include promoting charter schools, adopting higher standards for evaluating teachers, and closing academically struggling schools. In other school board races, their interests are more parochial, focusing on the educational or financial concerns of single school systems.

In Buffalo, the goal of Education Reform Now Advocacy and DFER during the May 2010 elections was to support local candidates who would be advocates of the state's Race to the Top federal-grant plan, which at the time was under consideration in the legislature, explained Joe Williams, the executive director of DFER, whose headquarters is in New York City.

"It had a lot to do with trying to keep education reform issues alive with Buffalo-area legisla-tors," Mr. Williams said. "We were trying to convince Buffalo legislators we were here to play."

Education Reform Now Advocacy, a nonpartisan, 501(c)4 group—technically a social-welfare organization—spent \$36,000 in independent expenditures in support of Mr. McCarthy and losing candidates in two other races. The group spent an additional \$10,000 on outreach designed to increase voter participation, which was not devoted to specific candidates, said Mr. Williams, who serves as the organization's president, in addition to his position with DFER.

He said that Education Reform Now Advocacy's legal counsel advised the group to avoid contacting the Buffalo candidates backed by the 501(c)4, so that there was a clear division between the independent expenditures and their campaigns.

"It wasn't like I went and interviewed with them or chose them," recalled Mr. McCarthy. "They chose me, based on the platform that I had for the Buffalo public schools." At the same time, he added, "I wasn't going to call them and tell them to stop."

While Mr. Williams says DFER takes an interest in relatively few local races each year, focusing most of its attention at the state level, the Portland, Ore.-based Stand for Children has taken a more active role in backing candidates for school boards. Since 2009, it has gotten behind board candidates in communities such as:

- Denver
- Houston
- Sacramento, CA
- Tacoma, WA

- Issaquah, WA
- Lincoln County, OR
- Memphis, TN,
- Murphy School District, Phoenix
- Roosevelt School District, Phoenix

### **Setting an Agenda**

Another nationwide education advocacy group, StudentsFirst, is concentrating on state policy for now, according to its founder and chief executive officer, Michelle A. Rhee, a former District of Columbia schools chancellor. Ms. Rhee said her 2-year-old organization, which hopes to raise \$1 billion in five years, may turn to local elections "when we start to home in on states where we've passed the majority of our policy agenda and are starting to work with local jurisdictions on implementation."

Stand for Children officials say their work in local elections encourages voters to become more informed and impassioned about education issues. Like DFER, Stand for Children operates separate 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 entities under the federal tax code and assigns them different organizational or political duties, which vary depending on what is permitted by law.

Some teachers' unions, however, take a different view of the participation of groups like Stand for Children in local elections.

### **Defining the Players**

#### **501(c)3**

Engage primarily in educational work, such as publishing nonpartisan analyses and reports or training local volunteers on the process of grassroots advocacy

Restricted lobbying

Prohibited from partisan political activity

Donations are typically tax-deductible, and the organizations do not have to publicly disclose donors' names.

#### **501(c)4**

Unlimited grassroots and direct lobbying, in addition to educational work

Limited amount of partisan political activity that may include "independent expenditures"—advertising supportive of or in opposition to candidates that is not coordinated with candidates' campaigns  
 Donations are not tax-deductible, and the organizations typically do not have to disclose donors' names.

"What it does is sort of take away the typical community voice that you have in those school board races, because it becomes pretty much like a state race," said Henry Roman, the president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, which opposed some of Stand for Children's preferred contenders in a 2011 school board race.

Philip Rumore, the president of the 3,600-member Buffalo Teachers Federation, which endorsed the candidate who finished second to Mr. McCarthy, Patricia Devis, said his union's power in local races traditionally derives not from financial contributions but from providing organizational support for candidates. His union, for instance, will sometimes ask each of its members to call voters on a list on assigned dates to remind them to vote.

But he admitted to being stunned by the amount of money provided by Education Reform Now Advocacy. "I don't like to say this, but there's no way we can compete with that kind of operation," Mr. Rumore said. In May elections, when voter turnout is traditionally low, major spending on mailers and phone calls is especially effective, the union official said: "It's money that rolls."

But representatives of education advocacy groups say nothing fundamental has changed in the landscape of local campaigns, except that more players are paying attention to important, and often overlooked, elections.

Previously, "maybe there weren't (c)3s and (c)4s, maybe the mechanics are slightly different, maybe the names have changed and the rules of engagement have changed," said Sue Levin, the executive director of the Oregon chapter of Stand for Children. "But the idea that a school board is a politicized body—and that its members and decisions are of intense interest to the community—is as old as public education in America."

### Showdown in Denver

One of the clearest demonstrations of national education advocacy groups' determination to put their stamp on local elections came during the 2011 school board races in Denver. The 82,000-student school system has been at the vanguard of some of the most hotly debated policies in education, most notably the development of a pay-for-performance system for teachers.

Denver's school board elections were widely viewed as a showdown between those supportive of aggressive plans to restructure underperforming schools and improve teacher performance versus those favoring more-traditional remedies.

Independent expenditures as [this flier opposing a Stand candidate](#) were a common sight board elections.

Stand for Children endorsed and Allegra "Happy" Haynes, Anne Carson. The city teachers' union Carson's opponents, and incumbent Arturo aligned with the labor

Both the union and the on electioneering and campaign favored candidates.

Stand for Children spent nearly total, campaign-finance records Teachers Association and its Education Association, spent

own PACs and on independent expenditures funneled through a group called Delta 4.0, for the races. In the end, two of the Stand-supported candidates won, while Ms. Draper was defeated by just a handful of votes.

"What the race showed is that people in Denver care deeply about the quality of these schools," said Kayla McGannon, the executive director of Stand for Children Colorado.

### Supporting Volunteers

In Oregon, Stand for Children's interest in local school board races grew partly out of the organization's involvement in state legislative elections, officials with the group said.

Many of the school board races receiving its attention were dominated by decidedly local issues, which varied by district and included teacher-transfer policies, improving early-childhood education, and creating a larger state rainy-day fund.

Some of the candidates that Stand for Children endorsed were volunteers for the organization who had worked on state campaigns before deciding to run for office themselves, according to Sarah G. Pope, the acting executive director for Stand for Children in Oregon. The group has been able to use its 501(c)3 funds—which

**The \$TAND Money Story**

Stand for Children is Big Out-of-State Money and Big Oil polluting Education politics in Colorado. The first rule in politics is always "follow the money."

Stand uses a shadowy "527" organization to bring out-of-state corporate money into Colorado, to fund their operations against school board members and other elected officials that fight for neighborhood schools.

Stand has raised over \$120,000 since August alone, making it the biggest repository of big money in education "reform" in Colorado.

Huge donations come from Chicago (Bruce Roemer, \$48,995) and New York (Jonathan Gray, \$28,995) Over 72% of Stand's donors are from outside of Colorado, according to recent campaign finance filings.

Using a 527 allows Stand to white-wash giant corporate contributions before they are spent in local school board races.

Stand's ties to right-wing political operatives is clear...

Candidate	Amount	Source
Allegra Haynes	\$10,000	Stand for Children
Arturo Escobar	\$10,000	Stand for Children
Jonathan Gray	\$28,995	New York
Bruce Roemer	\$48,995	Chicago
...	...	...

While Stand claims to be a parent organization that supports education, in reality it is an "astroturf" (fake grassroots) organization that works to elect anti-education funding Republicans in Denver, pumping money and volunteers into an effort to defeat Democratic legislator Rep. Dan Kagan in House District Three

financing communications such [for Children-backed](#) during the 2011 Denver school

supported three candidates: Rowe, and Jennifer Draper supported Ms. Rowe's and Ms. respectively: Andrea Mérida Gonzalez, who were seen as organization's positions.

advocacy groups spent heavily contributions in support of their

\$89,000 for those candidates in show. The Denver Classroom parent union, the Colorado upwards of \$200,000 from their

cannot be spent on campaign activity—for such purposes as educating volunteers on how to organize, how school boards work, and on how bills become law.

One such volunteer-turned-candidate was Jennifer Geller, who had helped Stand for Children in Eugene, Ore., before running unopposed for a seat on the city's school board in 2009.

"I recognized as a parent advocate that I had sort of limited influence," Ms. Geller said, but "if you're one of those seven people who's voting on the policies, your impact is much greater."

### **In-Kind Contributions**

Campaign-finance records show that Stand for Children's efforts since 2009 to help local candidates generally did not come in the form of campaign contributions, but rather in-kind donations, such as help with staffing phone banks, canvassing, and other organizational and outreach efforts, similar to what union members traditionally do.

"You don't win a local election by throwing money at it," said Ms. Levin, the organization's executive director in Oregon, who is on leave from that post. "You win a local election for a school board by organizing people, knocking on doors, sitting in living rooms and talking to people."

In Buffalo, where Education Reform Now Advocacy sought to shape state legislative policy through local school board activity, the upshot of those efforts is unclear.

Mr. McCarthy won his three-person race, but the two other school board candidates backed by Education Reform Now Advocacy did not. The New York legislature approved the state's Race to the Top plan in 2010 with bipartisan support, though various aspects of that plan, particularly changes it would make to teacher evaluation, have been met with resistance by unions in various communities. Mr. McCarthy said he supports the Race to the Top, which awarded federal grants to states for pursuing school improvement strategies favored by the Obama administration, but he has been frustrated by what he sees as the slow, tangled implementation of the plan.

The Buffalo board member said he was grateful for the backing of the advocacy group, though he noted that its work also brought criticism from those who did not approve of its heavy spending.

"It added an element to my campaign," said Mr. McCarthy, who credited meaning name recognition. He added: "It was almost like a gift. You couldn't turn it down."

*Library Intern Amy Wickner contributed research to this story.*