

Published Online: May 21st, 2012

URL: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/23/32adv-local.h31.html>



Outside Advocacy Groups Target Local School Board Elections

Campaign-cash impact felt close to home

By [Sean Cavanagh](#) and [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

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. 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 legislators," 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 Houston; Sacramento, Calif.; Tacoma and Issaquah, Wash.; Lincoln County, Ore.; and Memphis, Tenn., among others.

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.

"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."

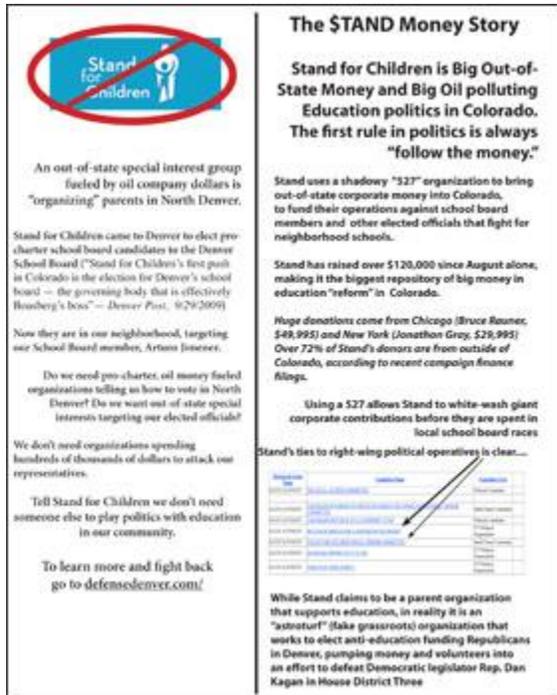
But representatives of education advocacy groups say nothing fundamental has changed in the landscape of local campaigns, except that more players are paying attention to important, and often overlooked, elections.

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.



The STAND 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 Rauner, \$48,995) and New York (Jonathon Gray, \$29,995) 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...

Donor	Amount
Bruce Rauner	\$48,995
Jonathon Gray	\$29,995
...	...

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

An out-of-state special interest group fueled by oil company dollars is "organizing" parents in North Denver.

Stand for Children came to Denver to elect pro-charter school board candidates to the Denver School Board ("Stand for Children's first push in Colorado is the election for Denver's school board -- the governing body that is effectively Boarding's boss" -- Denver Post, 9/29/2009)

Now they are in our neighborhood, targeting our School Board members, Arturo Jimenez.

Do we need pro-charter, oil money fueled organizations telling us how to vote in North Denver? Do we want out-of-state special interests targeting our elected officials?

We don't need organizations spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to attack our representatives.

Tell Stand for Children we don't need someone else to play politics with education in our community.

To learn more and fight back go to defensesdenver.com/

Independent expenditures financing communications such as [this flier opposing a Stand for Children-backed candidate](#) were a common sight during the 2011 Denver school board elections.

Stand for Children endorsed and supported three candidates: Allegra "Happy" Haynes, Anne Rowe, and Jennifer Draper Carson. The city teachers' union supported Ms. Rowe's and Ms. Carson's opponents, respectively: Andrea Mérida and incumbent Arturo Gonzalez, who were seen as aligned with the labor organization's positions.

Both the union and the advocacy groups spent heavily on electioneering and campaign contributions in support of their favored candidates.

Stand for Children spent nearly \$89,000 for those candidates in total, campaign-finance records show. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association and its parent union, the Colorado Education Association, spent upwards of \$200,000 from their 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 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.

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.

PAC

- Political action committees donate directly to candidates or to political parties, subject to federal and state contribution limits
- Donors' names must be disclosed.

IEC

- Popularly referred to as “super PACs” at the federal level, these committees can spend unlimited sums on independent expenditures
- Donors' names are disclosed.

SOURCES: Alliance for Justice; *Education Week*

[The Changing Face of Education Advocacy](#)
[New Advocacy Groups Shaking Up Education Field](#)
[New K-12 Advocacy Groups Wield State-Level Clout](#)
[Foundation Cash Boosts Education Advocacy Groups](#)
[Relationship Between Advocacy Groups, Unions Testy](#)
[Outside Advocacy Groups Target Local School Board Elections](#)

For more information about Stand for Children please visit www.Stand.org