

**Outside Influences on the Douglas County “Choice Scholarship” Program:  
American Legislative Exchange Council, American Enterprise Institute and the  
Independence Institute**

The Douglas County School District “Choice Scholarship” program was presented as being locally generated. In fact, however, it can be traced to the influence of powerful pro-voucher organizations, including the American Legislative Exchange Council, the American Enterprise Institute and the Independence Institute.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (“ALEC”), according to one of its own members, operates in a way that is intended to hide its influence on local legislation. ALEC drafts model legislation and presents that legislation to members at ALEC-sponsored conferences; ALEC members then make minor alterations to “disguise” the source of the legislation and present the legislation to their districts back home as if it were their own idea.<sup>1</sup>

One of the ways that ALEC promotes its model legislation, such as its “Parental Choice Scholarship” voucher program<sup>2</sup>, is through an annual education conference called the “School Choice Academy.” This ALEC conference trains legislators and other interested persons in how to plan, package and sell an array of school “choice” options.<sup>3</sup> The conference includes sessions on every aspect of adopting, selling and defending a “choice” program.<sup>4</sup>

The connections between this ALEC school choice conference, which pushes the ALEC Choice Scholarship program, and the persons who championed, drafted, and voted for the DCSD Choice Scholarship program are numerous.

The ALEC school choice conferences are co-sponsored by the Alliance for School Choice.<sup>5</sup> Ralph Nagel was a major donor to the Alliance, in the \$25,000- \$99,999 range<sup>6</sup> and Alex Cranberg was one of the Alliance's "Advocates for School Choice"<sup>7</sup>. (The "Advocates for School Choice" are, in their own words, "an advocacy organization focused exclusively on generating support for and securing passage of, quality school choice legislation. . . . Advocates. . . carefully assess the legislative prospects in each state, determine what resources are necessary to enact school choice legislation, and deploy resources as necessary."<sup>8</sup>) In 2009, Cranberg and Nagel were the major donors to the four DCSD board candidates (John Carson, Dan Gerken, Doug Benevento, and Meghann Silverthorn) who created and supported the ALEC-based "choice scholarship" program, each giving \$5,000 to each candidate for a total contribution of \$40,000.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after being elected, John Carson advocated the appointment of a “choice” task force. Significantly, all of the original intended appointees to the task force suggested by Carson<sup>10</sup> had strong ties to ALEC and its education agenda: Frank McNulty, who is a member of ALEC and serves on an ALEC task force;<sup>11</sup> Pam Benigno, who is Director of the Independence Institute Education Policy Center, serves on the ALEC education task force, and is active in proposing model education legislation for ALEC;<sup>12</sup> Ben deGrow, who is an analyst for the Independence Institute Education Policy Center and is invited to

give frequent presentations to the ALEC education task force;<sup>13</sup> and Frederick Hess, who is Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, gives education seminars with representatives of ALEC, and relies on ALEC education “expert” Richard Vedder in his own reports.<sup>14</sup> Benigno and deGrow ultimately served on the DCSD choice task force, and deGrow was appointed by the DCSD board to serve on the Choice Scholarship Charter School Board; Hess was hired by the DCSD Board to help select the superintendent who ultimately approved and implemented the Choice Scholarship program.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, the voucher program drafted and approved by this ALEC-connected group conformed to ALEC’s recommendations for a voucher program in Colorado<sup>16</sup>: it uses “scholarships” given to parents for their “choice” of schools; it draws exclusively on state, rather than local, monies; it is structured in a way that claims not to run afoul of the Colorado constitution’s Compelled Support Clause and so-called Blaine amendments; and it is even named the “Choice Scholarship” program, in conformity with the ALEC model legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/07/14-12>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.edchoice.org/Documents/SchoolChoice/Parental-Choice-Scholarship-Program-Act-Universal.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2005/11/01/school-choice-academy-spurs-legislative-interest>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=School\\_Choice\\_Academy&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=5846](http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=School_Choice_Academy&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=5846) and <http://www.sos.nh.gov/15-B%20Filings%202007/McRae,%20Karen%20100907.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sos.nh.gov/15-B%20Filings%202007/McRae,%20Karen%20100907.pdf>. See also Alliance for School Choice 2007 Annual Statement, p. 28 of PDF, p. 26 of print copy, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007\\_07222008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007_07222008.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Alliance for School Choice 2007 Annual Statement, p. 28 of PDF, p. 26 of print copy, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007\\_07222008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007_07222008.pdf), p. 37 of pdf.

<sup>7</sup> Alliance for School Choice 2007 Annual Statement, p. 28 of PDF, p. 26 of print copy, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007\\_07222008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/AnnualReport2007_07222008.pdf), p. 45 of pdf.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> <https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70441>

<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70443>

<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70903>

<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70652>

<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70651>

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<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70404>

<https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/CampaignFinance/Filings/Schedules/ViewContributionSchedule.aspx?FilingID=70403>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dcft.net/schoolboard/2010-05-04.pdf>

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- <sup>11</sup> [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Energy%2c\\_Environment\\_and\\_Agriculture\\_Task\\_Force](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Energy%2c_Environment_and_Agriculture_Task_Force)
- <sup>12</sup> [http://old.i2i.org/main/newsletter.php?newsletter\\_id=34&cycle=2009-11](http://old.i2i.org/main/newsletter.php?newsletter_id=34&cycle=2009-11)
- <sup>13</sup> [http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Education\\_TF\\_Meetings](http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Education_TF_Meetings)  
[http://old.i2i.org/main/newsletter.php?newsletter\\_id=21&cycle=2002-2](http://old.i2i.org/main/newsletter.php?newsletter_id=21&cycle=2002-2)
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.spn.org/events/agenda>  
[http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Board\\_of\\_Scholars&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=15722](http://www.alec.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Board_of_Scholars&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=15722)): <http://www.frederickhess.org/5054/teacher-quality-teacher-pay>
- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.indenvertimes.com/douglas-county-seeking-super-superintendent/>
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www.alec.org/am/pdf/schoolchoice/colorado.pdf>  
<http://www.edchoice.org/Documents/SchoolChoice/Parental-Choice-Scholarship-Program-Act-Universal.aspx>