

PAY TO PLAY

Charter Schools Buy Influence
With New York's Senate Democrats



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Make the Road New York

New York Communities for Change

*Data provided by the New York State Board of Elections, and
analyzed by the Public Accountability Initiative.*

In 2019, New York's Senate Democrats received \$409,910 from charter school political donors.

The Damaging Impact of Charter Schools

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run, have become the most pervasive example of privatization in education. Despite the lack of data or little evidence of success, charter schools continue to pedal the myth of the self-acclaimed "high performing charter school" as justification for their existence and even expansion. The reality in classrooms is much different: charter schools have high suspension and disciplinary rates, especially of students with disabilities, English Language learners and high need students, and they seldom enroll more students once others drop. The result is that public schools serve twice as many English Language Learners than charter schools, more students with severe disabilities, and more students in deep poverty – and that means that the test scores of many charters only reflect the achievement of the survivors who have endured a school's treatment.

State law mandates that local school districts pay tuition to charter schools in that district. State law also mandates that local school districts increase the per pupil tuition they pay by as much as their own spending per pupil increases. The funneling of public dollars to privately run charter schools undermines the home district schools, sabotaging the success of public school students by taking away resources for services and programs they need. Furthermore, the legacy of chronic underfunding in communities of color, combined with the fact that charter chains often target neighborhoods with struggling schools, it is Black and Brown communities that overwhelmingly have to deal with the disastrous impact of school privatization.

Given that charter schools are the most obvious tool of privatizers, why do charter schools continue to have legislative support? The answer lies in who is backing them. Large, privately run charter school chains are essentially a capitalist venture, operated by for-profit management companies and backed by hedge fund

billionaires, who make large contributions to elected officials to promote their privatization agenda, while some funnel money back to their real estate companies that rent space to the same charter schools they support.

Privatization & Politics

To protect their scheme, backers of privately run charter schools donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to political campaigns that will support the continuation and expansion of charter schools.

In 2017, the Independent Democratic Conference received almost \$700,000 from charter school political donors.¹ That same year, the IDC and the Republicans, delivered for charter schools a per pupil increase that was twice as big as the per pupil increase that public school students received. Yet, despite the heavy investment the charter-pushers made in the elections of 2018, the public spoke loudly and clearly by decidedly defeating six out eight IDC members, giving the Democrats a strong majority. Most of the newly elected Senators ran on a strong public education platform, committing to fighting for equitable and adequate funding.

Yet, the New Yorkers who worked hard to have a Democratic Senate did not see the promises that were made materialize. The 2019-20 enacted budget included barely enough of a school aid increase for public schools to maintain the programs and services they had, and not adequate to make improvements. Governor Cuomo, who has been the number one beneficiary of the charter school political donors, blocked the path for adequate funding for public schools, while pushing policies that pave the way toward privatization. The other two houses agreed to a budget that included an increase for charter schools – while allocating exactly the same amount for public schools as the State had done the prior year, with Republicans in control of the Senate.

The alarming reality is that the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee as well as individual Senators have raked in a substantial amount from charter school political donors; in 2019, Senate Democrats received in \$409,910 from charter school political donors. What will that translate to in the enacted budget?

¹ "Pay to Play: Charter Schools & The IDC," June 2017, Alliance for Quality Education, accessed March 2020: http://www.ageny.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Charter_IDC_report_FINAL.pdf

Will the Democratic Senate stand tall against privatization interest and fully support public schools, or will they side with their political donors?

Will charters influence the 2020-21 budget?

This year, Governor Cuomo's proposed budget would give charter schools an increase of 5.3 percent, but just 1.9 percent for public schools. That would drive 67 percent of the school aid increase for New York City to the 11 percent of students who attend charter schools.

In just a few short days the Senate Democratic Conference will publish its own budget proposal. Then, the Governor, the Senate majority and Assembly majority will enter in three-way negotiations to decide the budget of the state. Many Democratic Senators have committed to fighting for state revenues to fund public schools, but there are many others who have not – including some who have accepted campaign contributions from charter school political donors.

The goals of this legislative session are crystal clear: we need to prioritize fully funding Foundation Aid for our public schools, where the overwhelming majority of our students get their education, instead of continuing the giveaways to privately run charter schools. And the legislature and the Governor must prioritize enacting campaign finance reform. New Yorkers deserve a responsive, accountable government. To tackle the crisis of education inequity, we must transform a campaign finance system that advantages the interests of the few over those of the many. Legislators should be influenced by parents in their communities, not hedge fund billionaires. Children and communities need their representatives to be champions for our public schools.

New Yorkers need State Legislators who will reject the Governor's proposals that would shortchange public schools while giving handouts to his backers who support charter schools. We need legislators who will fight to maintain the cap on charter schools. We need champions for public school students. We need champions for public financing of elections. We call on those Democratic legislators who have accepted campaign contributions from the charter school industry to return those contributions, and for the entire legislature to immediately enact campaign finance reform.

Charter PACs - Recipients

Name	Total
NYS DSCC	\$160,000.00
Kevin Thomas	\$30,600.00
Nassau County Democratic Committee	\$25,000.00
Kevin Parker	\$22,300.00
Michael Gianaris	\$21,000.00
Luis Sepulveda	\$12,000.00
Peter Harckham	\$11,800.00
Diane Savino	\$4,000.00
Anna Kaplan	\$2,500.00
Andrea Stewart-Cousins	\$2,000.00
Joseph Addabbo	\$1,000.00
Shelley Mayer	\$500.00
Chris Jacobs	\$500.00
Grand Total	\$293,200.00

Recipients of Charter Individual Donors

NYS DEMOCRATIC SENATE CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE (NYS DSCC)	\$94,210.00
FRIENDS OF KEVIN PARKER	\$10,000.00
FRIENDS OF KEVIN THOMAS FOR SENATE	\$5,000.00
FRIENDS OF JAMES SKOUFIS	\$5,000.00
KENNEDY FOR SENATE	\$2,500.00
Grand Total	\$116,710.00

Data provided by the New York State Board of Elections, analyzed by the Public Accountability Initiative.