

N.J. school voucher fight tilts to the right

By Elise Young

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A lawsuit to apply New Jersey's public-education funding toward private-school tuition has key support from some of the country's most conservative charitable foundations, including those run by heirs to the Wal-Mart and Amway fortunes, public records show.

Excellent Education for Everyone, or E3, the state's leading proponent of school vouchers, has been granted at least \$1.65 million from the Walton Family Foundation, a perennial underwriter of "family values" think tanks, Christian schools and Republican candidates for national public office, according to federal tax filings.

E3 also has reaped at least \$230,000 from the Morristown-based William E. Simon Foundation, whose stated mission is "to strengthen the free-enterprise system and the spiritual values on which it rests: individual freedom, initiative, thrift, self-discipline and faith in God."

Dan Gaby, executive director of E3, said it is no secret that most of its funding comes from organizations that promote a distinctly conservative agenda.

"We have no compunction about where our funding comes from," Gaby said. "And we get money from them every year. Look, the people who fund us believe in free-market solutions. I don't care what rhetoric you throw around about the right wing and conservatives. It's all ridiculous."

Other grants have come from E3's founder, Peter R. Denton of Moorestown, who in recent years also has given \$113,200 to New Jersey Republicans running for public office.

E3 also has collected \$25,000 from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation -- one of the "four sisters" of leading conservative philanthropy -- and \$20,000 from the FM Kirby Foundation, known for channeling right-leaning speakers to college campuses.

Nationally, the school-voucher and charter movement has the backing of Betsy and Dick DeVos, whose multibillion-dollar family fortune -- based on Amway sales -- directs hundreds of thousands of dollars to activists in Florida, Michigan and elsewhere. Betsy DeVos also sits on the board of the Arizona-based Alliance for School Choice, the venerable leader of the schools-choice movement and an ally of Excellent Education for Everyone.

E3, based in Camden and Newark, is a primary backer of a lawsuit filed July 17 in Newark by parents of a dozen students in 96 of New Jersey's worst public schools, including some in Englewood and Paterson. The parents' lawyers are asking that the complaint be considered a class action involving 60,000 pupils.

If the courts rule for the parents, public education could be turned on its head: The plaintiffs, in mostly black and Latino districts, want the state to give them control of the average \$12,981 spent annually per pupil, and to relax school-district boundaries that dictate where children must attend class. Parents then could apply the education dollars to any better-performing school, public or private, in any town.

Education failures?

According to the lawsuit, the state has failed to provide a constitutionally guaranteed "thorough and efficient" education for all children.

It points to 60,000 students who attend 96 schools in 25 districts, and says that for at least two consecutive years, those schools have trailed on standardized tests.

To some degree the lawsuit praises the court-ordered extra funding funneled to the 31 so-called

Abbott districts, which have the state's worst-performing schools. But ultimately, it says, the majority of students there continue to flail.

The effort has set the 192,000-member New Jersey Education Association on a mission to discredit anyone attempting to dismantle public schools. The union says that across the country, voucher systems and charter schools typically have yet to achieve remarkable results. It says its members are dedicated to New Jersey's students. And it questions how the entire system can be "broken" -- as E3 so often says -- when overall, the state has high SAT scores and Advanced Placement enrollment and the country's best high school graduation rate.

In a section of its Web site dedicated to vouchers, the teachers union dismisses E3 a "front group ... backed by right-wing money."

As for the conservative foundations funding the voucher movement throughout the country, the NJEA says: "Their real motives range from desire to profit from publicly funded vouchers to the outright elimination of public education."

The teachers union is particularly outspoken about voucher proponents' presence in minority districts. It points out that the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which has financed voucher issues in other states, granted \$1 million to underwrite "The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life," the 1994 book that concluded that African-Americans were genetically incapable of higher learning.

"This is a national movement whose agenda is not to improve the circumstances of people of color," said Steve Wollmer, a spokesman for the NJEA. "It's a movement that is using them as props in an effort to divert public money into private institutions."

The Rev. Reginald T. Jackson -- who sits on the E3 board, and whose Black Ministers Council came out in favor of the lawsuit -- says the NJEA is plain wrong.

"There's a definition I have for denial: 'Don't even know I am lying,' " Jackson said. "They are in denial as it relates to low-income and poor urban parents who desire for their children to get a

good education and future. It is interesting that their whole argument centers on opposition to school choice, but they have absolutely nothing that they offer to reform the public schools."

Breadth of support

Clint Bolick, head of the Arizona-based Alliance for School Choice, says the very breadth of support for vouchers in New Jersey -- a Democratic-controlled and socially liberal "blue" state -- is proof enough that the NJEA is mistaken.

"The Black Ministers Council and the Latino Leadership Alliance can never be accused of being fronts for the conservative movement," Bolick said. "Both of them were active organizational supporters of Governor Corzine. Last time I looked, the governor was certainly not a member of a right-wing conspiracy."

Larry Cirignano, E3's first director in 1999 who now leads several Roman Catholic values groups, says teachers unions and other critics don't thoroughly understand the concept of school vouchers, and choose instead to attack the source of funding.

"It's true that a lot of people who are interested in this are coming out of a religious perspective, or are people who are financially well-off and are capitalists or industrialists," he says. "It doesn't make their points invalid."

The Walton Family Foundation - which is separate from the Wal-Mart Foundation - gave away \$210 million in 2005, according to published reports. At the same time, it came under criticism by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a non-profit, non-partisan tracker of charitable donations.

In a report titled "The Waltons and Wal-Mart: Self-Interested Philanthropy," released in September, the committee said that the family's funding of charter schools and vouchers could erode public schools and backfire on the country's poorest students.

"Why is the richest family in the world so committed to education, and specifically to school choice, when they themselves mostly attended public school to apparently good effect?" the report asks.

A spokeswoman for the Walton Family Foundation said it had no comment on its giving practices.

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