

We at Advocates for Public Education Policy have great concern about the influence of ĐFER (Democrats for Education Reform) on Democratic legislators. We believe it is past time that Democratic legislators and Democratic Party leaders adhere to the party platform, rules, and principles and insist that ĐFER stop using the word “Democrats” in its name and call them out when they do! We believe that the party needs to stop letting them pretend to represent the Democratic Party in their advocacy.

ĐFER does not represent the Democratic party, yet they continue to lead people to believe that they do. The Democratic Party in 2018 at the State Assembly overwhelmingly passed a resolution demanding that ĐFER drop the word “Democrats” from their name. They have refused to do so, ignoring this resolution as well as party rules and a state law, CRS 1-3-108, which states: “No person, group of persons, or organization shall use the name or address of a political party in any manner unless the person, group of persons, or organization has received permission to use the name or address from the executive committee of the political party.”

It is obvious why ĐFER has been able to ignore the law and the party’s rules – money! They have millions of dollars flowing to them from pro-voucher and corporate privatization donors, which are an anathema to the Democratic Party’s platform and principles. The Walton foundation has been very generous with ĐFER’s funding arm, Education Reform Now (ERN), with \$16 million in donations in a six-year period.

Whitney Tilson, one of three ĐFER founders, said he was inspired to start the organization by John Walton, Sam Walton’s son. Tilson wrote in a [2010 blog post](#) that he and other hedge fund managers interested in charter schools and education reform began meeting with Walton and realized proponents of school choice could raise money from Republicans but Democrats were shutting the door. “The real problem, politically, was not the Republican Party; it was the Democratic Party,” Tilson said. “So, it dawned on us, over the course of six months or a year, that it had to be an inside job. The main obstacle to education reform was moving the Democratic Party, and it had to be Democrats who did it. It had to be an inside job.”

ĐFER is the “inside job”!

Democratic candidates need money for their campaigns, and ĐFER has lots of it. After helping pro-“reform” candidates get elected, ĐFER has used its full-time lobbyists at the Capitol to promote their hidden agenda as positive reform. Hence, we often see good Democratic legislation weakened or killed even when Democrats are in the majority. For example, when Senator Story’s bill SB22-069, Learning Disruption Effect on Teacher Evaluation, was heard in the Senate Education Committee, there was testimony in support of it not only from regular education stakeholder organizations (CEA, CASE, CASB, Rural Schools Alliance, and PTA), but also from many individuals – parents and teachers who spoke earnestly, often emotionally, in support of the bill. ĐFER was one of only four to testify against the bill in this 2-hour hearing. At the end of all the testimony, the Chairman announced the bill would be laid over for a vote at a later date. It’s been well over a month since that Feb. 24 hearing, and SB 69 still has not been calendared for a committee vote; we believe it will be allowed to “die on the calendar” by not having a vote by the deadline.

Another example is Rep. Bacon’s bill, HB21-1295 on charter school appeals, which was killed in committee. That bill had overwhelming support from the education stakeholders, but ĐFER lobbied against it.

Clearly, this is because ĐFER was created to surreptitiously weaken support for our public school system by building support for charter schools and opening the door to vouchers. The ĐFER Colorado website says: “We consistently play a major part in enlisting Democrats to support increases in the federal public Charter School Program (CSP). In March 2018,

Congress approved \$400 million – a 17 percent increase – for the CSP in its FY 2018 spending bill, bringing the program to its highest funding level in history. At the state level, we achieved significant funding wins for public charter schools throughout the country, including a landmark Colorado law, HB17-1375, Distributing Mill Levy Override Revenue to Schools, generating \$34 million in new funding.” This quotation reveals ĐFER’s true agenda.

Education stakeholders have worked hard to get pro-public education people elected. We think it is very telling that Senator Story, Vice Chair of the Senate Education Committee, was not promoted to Chair upon the reassignment of Senator Zenzinger to the Joint Budget Committee – obviously because ĐFER opposed her bill, SB22-069, as well as SB22-044, Use of Student Growth in Educator Evaluations.

Teachers are exhausted and demoralized as they struggle to meet the academic and mental health needs of students. They feel a lack of support and respect from the Legislature, especially when it just recently voted to continue the unfair linking of teacher evaluations to student test scores. They feel their profession is under attack. Many have chosen to leave the profession. Educators know that policies ĐFER advocates on are damaging the teaching profession and contributing to the teacher shortage.

It’s time for Democrats to stand behind our principles and platform and stand up for teachers and public education by pushing back on ĐFER!