

FOLLOWING THE MONEY

Charter lobby group details contributions

Walmart and venture capitalists lead donors

Walt-Mart billionaire Alice Walton, the Mass High Technology Council and managing partners at Bain Capital are among the deep pockets behind the ballot campaign to increase the number of Commonwealth charter schools in Massachusetts, according to figures recently filed with the state Office of Campaign Finance.

The lobby group, Committee for Public Charter Schools, led by former Board of Education chairman James Peyser, raised close to \$390,000 from only 36 donors as part of its effort to put a question on the November 2010 ballot to lift the cap on Commonwealth charters. Almost all of the money was spent for gathering signatures. The lobby group paid a Brookline-based company, SpoonWorks, \$325,000 for gathering 72,641 certified signatures, which works out to \$4.47 per name.

Peyser has said the lobby group will not pursue its ballot question because the legislature delivered virtually everything the group had sought in the recently enacted education bill. Peyser's group used their ballot initiative as a threat in pushing its agenda with legislative leaders who acquiesced on every significant issue. But the group could still go forward, since the requisite number of signatures has been certified by the Secretary of State.

Of particular interest to Peyser is a provision in the ed bill that, for the first time, allows companies to run networks or chains of charter schools under a single board of trustees. Peyser earns six figures a year as an executive with a capital formation group, NewSchools Venture Fund, that underwrites the start up of those very chains of charter schools. The education bill also doubles the amount of money charter schools can divert from public school districts with low MCAS scores, enabling education management companies promoted by Peyser's group to tap into millions of additional state dollars that would otherwise serve public schools.

Alice Walton of Bentonville, Arkansas donated \$30,000 to the ballot campaign. Seven managing partners with Bain Capital, contributed at total of \$30,500. The venture capital firm founder in 1984 by Mitt Romney et al has been a master of turning enormous profits from downsizing and pushing back unions in companies it acquires.

The largest special interest group donation came from the Massachusetts High Technology Council, which put in \$52,500. The president of the council, Chris Anderson, like James Peyser, is former chairman of the state Board of Education, responsible for awarding new charters and overseeing existing charter schools. The board is currently chaired by Maura Banta, an executive with IBM.

The high technology council draws its membership, and money, from defense contractors such as General Dynamics, drug makers such as Pfizer and GlaxoKlineSmith, health insurers such as Harvard Pilgrim (until recently headed by Republican gubernatorial candidate Charles Baker) financial institutions and electronics and technology firms such as Teradyne, founded by James Peyser's father-in-law.

The high technology council figures prominently in dozens of editorials and op-ed pieces, including many by Scott Lehigh and other Boston Globe editorial writers, as an objective business group interested in helping low-income children with educational options. However, The image falls apart when looking at the track record of many of the council's members relative to low income families and the demographic analysis of Commonwealth charter schools. Compared to the districts from which they draw their students, Commonwealth charters consistently enroll a smaller percent of children from low income families, significantly fewer children with special needs and almost no students learning English as a second language.

Other major contributors to the ballot campaign include Amos Hostetter of Pilot House Associates, \$32,500, executives at the technology firm Akamai, \$35,000; and long time charter lobby funding Lawrence Coolidge \$35,000. Unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial candidate Kerry Healy ponied up \$500. James Peyser himself put in the token sum of \$25.

A complete list of donors can be found at:

<http://www.efs.cpf.state.ma.us/DisplayReport.aspx?reportId=106135&schedule=DisplaySchedule>
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