



## School Boards Beware

### *Influential National Network Calls for Elimination of School Boards*

**A**n organization with nationwide influence is working hard to negate the decision-making and leadership authority of each school board in Wisconsin and across the country.

According to the Report Card on American Education, the education agenda of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) calls for:

- **Reducing** the influence of, or elimination of, local school districts and school boards.
- **Privatizing** education through vouchers, charters and tax incentives.
- **Increasing** student testing and reporting.
- **Introducing** market factors into schools, particular the teaching profession.

In short, ALEC seeks to undo much of the work and power of school boards.

#### ■ What is ALEC?

ALEC is a national network based in Washington, D.C., which has had strong impact on legislation in Wisconsin. ALEC describes itself as a membership organization for those who share a common belief in “limited government, free markets, federalism, and individual liberties.” Its goal is to create and enact model legislation, which they develop.

Although identified as nonpartisan, ALEC’s members skew to the conservative end of the political spectrum and include corporations, foundations, and “think tanks.” The corporations (profit and nonprofit) pay large annual fees and pay the additional costs of sponsoring meetings. Corporate members pay to serve on their taskforces, and provide the funds for the state legislators to attend ALEC meetings.

Model legislation is developed through the ALEC taskforces (e.g., health, safety, education), each co-chaired by a corporate and legislative member. In order to pass a model bill out of the ALEC taskforce, both the public and elected sides of the committee must agree. The elected officials then submit these proposals to their own state legislatures.

Members of the taskforces have an interest in the topical area of the taskforce. For example, education taskforce members include representatives from the Friedman Foundation, the Charter School Association, the private school associations, and corporations providing education services.

The proposals cannot move out of the taskforce without the approval of the corporate interests. The corporations involved have an interest in the areas and thus typi-

cally stand to profit financially from the proposals.

For example, two large for-profit corporate providers of virtual education, Connections Academy and K-12 Inc., had heavy involvement in the development of the ALEC model Virtual Public Schools Act. At the time it was drafted by ALEC, the chair of the education committee was Mickey Revenaugh, a principal employee of Connections Academy. Connections Academy and K-12 have reaped huge financial benefits in the states where the Virtual Schools Act has been passed.

In Tennessee, K-12 Inc. received the state contract for virtual schools shortly after it passed their legislature as a no-bid contract. For this contract they received more than \$5,000 per student from the state during the 2011- 2012 school year. Currently, the legislature is auditing this contract due to low student performance in the program.

#### ■ ALEC in Wisconsin

ALEC’s effect in Wisconsin has been significant. The original Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, enacted in 1990, was championed by Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, an early ALEC member.

“Myself, I always loved to go to these [ALEC] meetings because I always found new ideas, and then

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I'd take them back to Wisconsin, disguise them a little bit and declare that it's mine," Thompson said in a 2002 interview with National Public Radio.

True to Thompson's word, the outline for the Milwaukee Choice Program can be found in ALEC's *1985 Education Source Book*. Also see sidebar "ALEC Legislation in Wisconsin."

### ■ ALEC Pushes Vouchers

One of the key goals of ALEC is to privatize education through vouchers. Milton Friedman argued vouchers would foster competition and improve students' learning. Experience has not borne this out.

The research indicates that voucher schools do not outperform their public school counterparts. The children in voucher programs should in fact be doing better because they represent the "easier" to educate segment of the public school population.

I say "easier" because, first, there are far fewer students with disabilities served in private voucher schools. Second, even though they receive public funding, private schools retain the right to select, reject, and expel students through admissions and disciplinary rules. Finally, children in voucher schools come from families who are engaged enough in their children's education to have actively moved them to the private system. Education research is clear that children with actively engaged parental or home support will clearly outperform students who do not have that support in their lives. With "easier" student voucher schools should clearly outperform the publics. Doing almost as good can hardly be called success.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT ALEC

American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) website:

[www.alec.org](http://www.alec.org)

ALEC Exposed:

[www.alecexposed.org](http://www.alecexposed.org)

## ALEC Legislation in Wisconsin

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is working to, among other goals, reduce the role of school boards in education. Here is a listing of bills (and enacted statutes) from the 2011-2012 Wisconsin Legislative Session that mirrored ALEC model legislation (see [www.alexexposed.org](http://www.alexexposed.org) for database of ALEC model legislation).

- **AB 68** — ALEC Castle Doctrine Act
- **SJR 21** — ALEC Freedom of Choice in Health Care Act
- **Act 2** — ALEC Joint and Several Liability Act, Punitive Damages Standards Act, and Product Liability Act
- **SJR 23** — ALEC Constitutional Amendment Restricting the Use of Vehicle Fees and Taxes for Highway Purposes
- **AB 13** — ALEC Drug Liability Act
- **Act 10** — ALEC Public Employer Payroll Deduction Act
- **Act 9** — ALEC Super-Majority Act
- **Act 23** — ALEC Voter ID Act
- **Act 1** — ALEC Health Savings Account Act
- **AB 110** — ALEC Special Needs Scholarship Program Act
- **SJR 21** — ALEC Freedom of Choice in Health Care Act

Voucher advocates argue that even if the academics are not up to par, at least the cost for the state is lower. Sad, and not true. First, if you are not attracting public school students to switch to private schools, the state just ends up paying tuition for those students already enrolled in the private school — this just shifts private costs to taxpayers. Second, the local schools district pays for more than the cost of the voucher; typically paying for transportation, special education and support services. Vouchers have neither shown success academically nor financially.

### ■ Reducing the Role of School Boards

The ALEC agenda in education is ambitious. Model bills seek to influence teacher certification, teacher evaluation, collective bargaining, curriculum, funding, special education, and student assessment.

Common throughout the bills are proposals to decrease local control of schools by local school boards while increasing control, influence, and profits of the companies in the

education sector. Privatization is consistent with the interests of the corporate ALEC members.

The ALEC goal to eliminate school districts and school boards is a bit shocking — but the idea is to make every school, public and private, independent through vouchers for all students. By providing all funding to parents rather than school districts, there is no need for local coordination, control or oversight.

Personally, I believe there is a purpose for public schools and the local public oversight necessary to support and guide them. Public education was created to serve the needs of the public — ensuring that every child had access to an education that would help him/her become an active citizen, capable of participating in our democratic process.

What happens to our democracy when we return to an educational system where access is defined by corporate interest and divided by class, language, ability, race, and religion? In a push to a free market education do we lose the purpose of public education? ■

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