



From Tabloids to Tablets: News Corp Spends Big on LA School Board Race, Sets Sights on Public Education "Market"

by [Brendan Fischer](#) — March 11, 2013 - 8:23am

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A subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp -- parent company of Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* -- has spent a whopping \$250,000 on the Los Angeles school board race, just as the corporation focuses on making money off of public education. News Corp and its for-profit education subsidiaries are also members of the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), and the education initiatives promoted by News Corp's preferred candidates track the ALEC agenda.

Murdoch has [called](#) the for-profit K-12 education industry "a \$500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed" -- and his News Corp is investing big to capture that market. In 2010, News Corp acquired Wireless Generation, a for-profit online education, software, and testing corporation, for \$360 million. [Its latest venture](#) is a digital K-12 curricula to be sold and taught on a specialized "Amplify Tablet" that runs on the Android platform.

The success of these education initiatives, though, will depend on school districts agreeing to fork over millions to News Corp: each basic Amplify Tablet [costs](#) \$299, plus a mandatory \$99/year subscription. If a school district like Los Angeles were to buy Amplify Tablets for just half of their 662,140 students, News Corp could make nearly \$99 million, plus about \$33 million in subscription fees each year after that. Prices climb higher for the Amplify Tablet Plus model.

So it is a small investment for a News Corp subsidiary to [spend](#) \$250,000 backing candidates in the LA School Board race. The head of its "Amplify" education division, former NYC Education Chancellor Joel Klein, chipped in another \$50,000.

News Corp Backing "Coalition for School Reform," Which Tracks ALEC Agenda

The beneficiary of News Corp's largesse is the "Coalition for School Reform," a Political Action Committee formed to help elect school board members who will support superintendent John Deasy's reforms -- such as charter schools, teacher evaluations based on student test scores, and "parent trigger" laws.

[According to Education Week](#), News Corp's Wireless Generation "already has a big contract" with the LA Unified School District for student assessment, and presumably has more to gain with a school board devoted to more testing.

Each of Deasy's initiatives also track the for-profit education agenda advanced by ALEC. ALEC's education agenda encompasses a more than 20-year effort to privatize public education through an ever-expanding network of private charter schools or for-profit internet school corporations. ALEC bills also allow public and for-profit schools to loosen standards for teachers and administrators and escape the protections of collective bargaining agreements.

Both Wireless Generation and News Corp are members of the ALEC Education Task Force. Deasy was previously Deputy Director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's education program, and the Gates Foundation gave ALEC a \$376,000 grant in December 2011 to push its teacher evaluation initiatives. (Gates [announced](#) in April 2012 it has no plans to fund ALEC again, but its \$376,000 grant runs through October 2013).

Deasy, ALEC, and News Corp Support Parent Trigger

Among other initiatives, ALEC has also been pushing the ["Parent Trigger" laws](#) that allow parents at any persistently failing school -- with "failing" defined by standardized test results -- to restructure the school either by turning it into a privately-managed charter operation, or firing the principal, or firing half the teachers. Deasy has voiced support for the Parent Trigger, which is backed by the charter school industry.

First passed in California, the ALEC Education Task Force voted to approve the "Parent Trigger Act" in December 2010, and the idea quickly spread. According to CMD's analysis, ALEC members have since introduced or cosponsored various versions of the bill in 17 states.

The [controversial 2012 film "Won't Back Down"](#) glorified the Parent Trigger laws, but the reality is quite different: petition drives have been organized by charter school operators that stood to profit from restructuring, and they have been accused of misleading parents about the true goal of the petition effort.

News Corp distributed the "Won't Back Down" film, and it was produced by Walden Media, owned by billionaire investor Philip Anschutz. Anschutz participates in the Koch

brothers' secretive political strategy summits and funds David Koch's Americans for Prosperity group, and bankrolls ALEC and ALEC member groups. In 2010, the Anschutz Foundation [gave](#) ALEC \$10,000 and Anschutz' Union Pacific firm [was an ALEC sponsor](#) the following year. The Foundation also [funded](#) three ALEC members who sat on the ALEC Education Task Force which approved the Parent Trigger Proposal: The Independence Institute, Center for Education Reform, and Pacific Research Institute.

Phillip Anschutz also [gave](#) \$100,000 to the Coalition for School Reform in the LA school board race.

Parent Trigger laws were hatched by a group called Parents Revolution, which received funding from groups supporting education privatization and charter school expansion, [like](#) the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. The Coalition for School Reform received a \$250,000 donation from Eli Broad and a \$340,000 contribution from the California Charter Schools Association, which is funded by the Walton Family Foundation and has a Walton as its vice-chair.

Other major donors to the Coalition included New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (\$1 million) and Michelle Rhee's Students First! (\$250,000).

Two Out of Three Candidates Advance; What's Next?

[In the March 5 primary](#), one of the three candidates supported by the Coalition for School Reform won and another will participate in a run-off election in May. In the third race (as Occidental College Professor Peter Dreier [describes](#)), the Coalition-backed candidate narrowly lost, despite her campaign and its backers [spending nearly twice as much](#) as the incumbent.

News Corp may be hoping that those candidates who are elected will be receptive to its new Amplify Tablet. But it will almost certainly find a willing audience among ALEC, the Gates Foundation, and other "reformers" who have prioritized online learning in recent years.

Even though there is limited evidence that technology alone can fix education, others are also concerned about Amplify's products given the phone-hacking scandal that has plagued News Corp since 2011. "I'm very concerned about them tracking children or using their data," Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers, told the *New York Times*. "They've proven not to be very trustworthy on that."

Harriet Rowan contributed to this article.