

National education reformers target local school boards

September 7 2016, by Sarah Reckhow , Rebecca Jacobsen



Sarah Reckhow, assistant professor of political science at Michigan State University, led a study looking at non-local contributions to school board races. Credit: Michigan State University

Local school board elections increasingly are becoming a national political battleground, as millions of dollars in campaign cash pours in

from out-of-state donors in the name of education reform, indicates new research led by a Michigan State University scholar.

Take, for example, Laurene Powell Jobs, Steve Jobs' widow and a California resident who has funneled some of her \$20 billion fortune to school board races not only in Los Angeles, but in Denver and New Orleans as well. Or John Arnold, a Texas hedge fund manager with a net worth of \$3 billion who also has contributed to school board candidates in those same three cities outside of his home state.

In most cases, wealthy outside donors are supporting reform-minded school board candidates who are competing with candidates backed by teacher unions, said Sarah Reckhow, MSU assistant professor of political science and lead author on the study.

"Our findings show how local arenas can serve as important battlegrounds in national politics - penetrated by networks of outside donors and organizations who see local elections as critical contests over competing visions of [education](#)," said Reckhow.

Reckhow, MSU's Rebecca Jacobsen and colleagues from Columbia University analyzed more than 16,000 contributions to school board races in Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans and Bridgeport, Connecticut, from 2008 to 2013. Their study, published online in *Urban Affairs Review*, is one of the first to examine non-local campaign contributions to school board elections.

Historically, school board elections have been low-budget and low-turnout affairs often dominated by teacher unions. But this is changing, the study found, with outside donors playing a large role in the school board elections in all four of the cities examined.

During the 2011-12 school board elections in Bridgeport, for example,

large national donors gave 66 percent of all contributions. And in the 2013 Los Angeles school board elections, large national donors gave 48 percent of all contributions.



Rebecca Jacobsen, associate professor and associate director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

Reckhow said she doubts outside donations in school board elections is a passing fad. In cities where outside donors were not opposed by outside union money - Denver and New Orleans - reform candidates were largely successful in winning elections. This means areas with less union involvement could present a strategic opportunity for outside donors supporting education reform.

Outside spending is also not restricted to larger urban school districts, as national education reform groups have targeted [school board](#) elections in smaller cities such as Elizabeth, N.J., and Burbank, California.

But what are the implications for local democracy?

Outside money may not be a bad thing if it comes from donors whose values and interests align with those of local residents, the study says. And it might even be a good thing if outside donations "offset the dominance of local elites with parochial interests or raise the visibility of elections."

On the other hand, attitudes toward education policy among the wealthy differ from most Americans. Rich donors tend to be more supportive of market-oriented reforms, such as charter schools and merit pay for teachers, but are less supportive of paying more taxes for early childhood education and federal spending to improve schools.

Moreover, local school politics has sometimes been more pragmatic and open to negotiated compromise than national education debates.

"The nationalization of local education politics might draw local leaders into the more ideologically polarized and unwavering position-taking that has contributed to national-level gridlock," the study warns.

In addition to Jacobsen, an associate professor of teacher education and associate director of MSU's Education Policy Center, Reckhow's co-authors include Jeffrey Henig and Jamie Alter Litt, both from Columbia University in New York.

Provided by Michigan State University

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