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Foundation funnels private monies to EAS

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Abstract (Abstract): DETROIT- Anewnonprofit will collect funds for Gov. Rick Snyder's state-wide district for "low-performing" schools. According to reports, the Michigan Education Excellence (MEE) Foundation has begun to raise millions in private donations to provide operating expenses and salaries for the Educational Achievement System (EAS) and its staff.

"We're in danger of letting one foundation run the educational policy of this entire state," says State Sen. Bert Johnson, D-Highland Park. "It says the public is no longer engaged, summarily dismissed by the governor, the state superintendent of education and Emergency Manager Roy Roberts."

"They've made a mockery of the intent of the original 2009 legislation," Johnson told the Michigan Citizen.

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Lawmaker questions legality

DETROIT- Anewnonprofit will collect funds for Gov. Rick Snyder's state-wide district for "low-performing" schools. According to reports, the Michigan Education Excellence (MEE) Foundation has begun to raise millions in private donations to provide operating expenses and salaries for the Educational Achievement System (EAS) and its staff.

Little is known about the newly formed foundation and its connections to Gov. Snyder. However, Eli Broad, the Californiabased billionaire philanthropist and proponent of charter schools is a major contributor.

"We're in danger of letting one foundation run the educational policy of this entire state," says State Sen. Bert Johnson, D-Highland Park. "It says the public is no longer engaged, summarily dismissed by the governor, the state superintendent of education and Emergency Manager Roy Roberts."

The Detroit Free Press reported on Oct. 27 that the MEE Foundation had already collected \$2 million since August. Of that, \$400,000 came from the California-based Broad Foundation.

Many are objecting to the intermingling of private and public monies, raising questions of governance and proportional representation for taxpayers in Detroit.

EAS Chancellor John Convington and former DPS Emergency Manager Robert Bobb are both graduates of the Eli Broad Superintendents Academy.

Bobb accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars during his tenure as DPS emergency manager for expenses and salary increases. To this day, no state official or court of law has challenged Bobb's right to collect monies from a private foundation with a history of support for charter schools.

State Sen. Johnson co-sponsored education reform legislation in 2009, qualifying Michigan for \$400 million in federal Race to the Top funding offered by President Barack Obama. In that house bill, legislators agreed to allow a statewide academic manager to oversee "low-performing" schools. Johnson now says that other measures in the bill, which were meant to put restrictions on charter schools, have been trampled.

Michigan was not chosen to receive the Race to the Top monies but the policy changes remain.

This summer, a Republican-dominated legislature introduced a bill to eliminate the state-wide cap on charters altogether.

"They've made a mockery of the intent of the original 2009 legislation," Johnson told the Michigan Citizen. "There is all this private money funding education and they're taking public monies over to charterize districts. That wasn't the intent of the legislation."

Johnson says the sudden infusion of private monies into the EAS should be contested by either citizen advocacy or through legal avenues.

"You can always challenge it in court," Johnson says. "To the extent that they have interpreted the 2009 legislation, I think there is that opportunity."

Detroit Library Commissioner and DPS activist Russ Bellant says Robert Bobb served the Broad Foundation directly by closing high-performing DPS schools and generally promoting the charterization of the district.

"Whenever you have private foundations donating to public entities, you have questions about proportional influence," Bellant says. "The main ethical problem I see is the conflict between private interest and public good. How can you take money from both when one wants to destroy the other?"

Roberts and Gov. Snyder first announced the EAS plan in July. Roberts later announced that the state-wide district would only grab 39 DPS schools during its first year, 2012. EAS would then add schools from districts around the state in 2013.

The salaries of John Covington and his 10-member staff are paid through the MEE Foundation. Covington's yearly salary is \$225,000. He also received a \$175,000 signing bonus.

The Michigan Education Excellence Foundation was incorporated Aug. 24 as a non-profit entity. Attorney W. Alan Wilk, of Dykema Law's Lansing office, is listed as the incorporating agent. Incorporating documents reveal that the group is also authorized to transact business under the assumed names Commitment To Detroit's Future and Commitment To Michigan's Future.

Bob Berg, a consultant to the EAS, says the MEE Foundation was formed because the state budget would not allow public financing of the EAS. He said the governor's office could speak to the decision to solicit foundation monies and other private support.

Berg, among many others, could not provide information on the MEE Foundation, its origins or who was running it.

Spokespersons for the Michigan Department of Education would not comment on the private funding for the EAS through the MEE Foundation, other than to say that the state department has no authority whatsoever over EAS and its oversight board, the EAA (Educational Achievement Authority).

They referred the Michigan Citizen to Gov. Snyder's office. Snyder's spokesperson, Sara Wurfel, had not returned phone requests for comment by the time this article went to print.

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