**Denver School Board 2015: Captured by Reform’s True Believers**

The [November 3, 2015 Denver School Board election](https://ballotpedia.org/Denver_Public_Schools_elections_(2015)) completed the efforts of corporate education reformers to control all 7 seats on the board. In that election, three seats, one At Large, and one each in Districts 1 and 5, were contested. This was not the first attempt at Board control—money from billionaires had [poured into previous Denver school board elections](http://www.westword.com/news/dps-school-board-race-fundraising-whos-getting-big-bucks-from-phil-anschutz-5870858) (e.g., 2013), but it did not result in a board that was unanimously in favor of corporate-style reforms.

Truth be told, Denver had been a billionaire school reform investment for over a decade.

In 2013 Michael Petrilli, the executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, [said that Denver was seen nationally as a “promising place”](http://www.denverpost.com/2013/04/16/denver-school-board-elections-focus-on-reform-draws-national-interest/) for school reform and that there was a lot of interest in ensuring that the school board had a strong “pro-reform stance.”

Foundation money from out of state reform-minded billionaires began flowing into Denver since 2002, when the [Los Angeles based Broad Foundation gave Denver Public Schools $1.7 million](http://broadfoundation.org/reports/2009-10foundationrreportseport.pdf) for a teacher performance pay system based on student achievement.

The billionaire’s agenda took off when the Denver School Board chose Michael Bennet as Superintendent of schools in 2005. [Like Joel Klein in New York City](http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/klein-steps-down-as-schools-chancellor-to-be-replaced-by-cathie-black-publisher/?_r=0), Bennet had no background in public education – [he came from a local investment firm](http://educationnext.org/denver-expands-choice-and-charters/) where he turned around failing companies.

Bennet began closing Denver schools almost immediately. [According to Education Next](http://educationnext.org/denver-expands-choice-and-charters/), DPS has closed or replaced 48 schools and opened more than 70, mostly charters since 2005. Denver subscribes to the portfolio model—a term derived from the investment world, where the district authorizes and oversees both district and charter schools. Having a pro-reform school board is therefore essential for charter growth and development.

In 2006, Bennet called on local and national civic and foundation leaders, including the Gates Foundation, to create an initiative call A+ Denver ([now known as A+ Colorado](http://apluscolorado.org/about-us/the-a-story/)). [A+ Denver was created](http://educationnext.org/denver-expands-choice-and-charters/) “to push for change and support the board when it promoted reform.”

When Bennet was appointed U.S. Senator in January of 2009, he recommended that the board replace him with his Chief Operating Officer, Tom Boasberg.

Like Bennet, Boasberg has no professional experience in education, and he was quick to adopt Bennet’s reform agenda. [Boasberg’s biography on the district website](http://communications.dpsk12.org/leadership.html#boasberg) proudly boasts that during his tenure the district has “welcomed the creation of more than 75 new schools and the closure or turnaround of more than 30 underperforming schools.”

The 2015 election was key to giving a green light for even more “reform.” That election pitted corporate reform candidates against candidates who, while supportive of many corporate school reforms, were not absolute in their allegiance to the Benet/Boasberg agenda.

The contest for the District 5 seat was between Lisa Flores, who supported the billionaire’s reform agenda without reservation and Michael Kiley who supported some reforms such as teacher pay-for-performance but wanted some restrictions on where charters could open. Kiley supported the establishment of charter schools in vacated buildings only. [Kiley also did not support establishing enrollment zones](http://www.denverpost.com/2015/10/18/denver-school-board-election-gets-less-attention-but-still-critical/), which were a popular corporate reform initiative that became an issue in the campaign.

For the at-large and District 1 seats, incumbents Happy Haynes and Ann Rowe were running for re-election; [both Haynes and Rowe supported](http://www.denverpost.com/2015/10/18/denver-school-board-election-gets-less-attention-but-still-critical/) teacher pay-for-performance, school enrollment zones, and support for charter school facilities without reservation.

In an effort to both unseat Haynes and Rowe, and to beat corporate-reform-sponsored District 5 challenger Flores, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) [spent a total of $170,500 in support of Robert Speth, Kristi Butkovich, and Michael Kiley](http://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/PublicSite/SearchPages/ExpenditureSearch.aspx).

Haynes was pitted against Robert Speth for the at-large seat, and Rowe against Kristi Butkovich for the District 1 seat. [Speth was the parent of Denver Public schoolchildren](http://greaterparkhill.org/2015/10/at-large-school-board-candidates-highlight-their-differences/), and an active volunteer in their school. He was a vocal critic of the damaging effects of the privatization movement in Denver, including undemocratic school closures, outsourcing operations of schools to private corporations, and the influence of Relay Graduate School of Education in the district.

Butkovitch was a [third generation DPS graduate](http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2015/07/14/denver-board-candidate-kristi-butkovich-decisionmaking-needs-to-include-community/), who was an opt-out activist and a founder of a pro-public education group, the [Denver Alliance for Public Education](https://www.facebook.com/denveralliance/). The wife of a retired teacher and administrator, she was also outspoken about her belief that there was a the national push to scapegoat teachers for economic problems.

Pro-corporate reform candidates received support from an Independent Expenditure Committee called *Raising Colorado*. Raising Colorado’s contributions for the Denver school board election came entirely from New York-based Education Reform Now Advocacy (ERNA), which is associated with the corporate reform promoting nonprofit, [Democrats for Education Reform (DFER)](https://edreformnow.org/chapters/dfer-colorado/).

Like the Newark mayoral race, that occurred the year before, ERNA, a 501 (c)(4) was funneling money into the Denver race, while using its not for profit status to hide donor names. was funneling money.

According to its 2014 990, ERNA contributed $465,000 to *Raising Colorado* and about another $100,000 to other organizations in the state. In 2015, it added an additional $375,000. year. Table 1 below shows the amounts and dates of the four 2015 contributions, a portion of which were used to purchase campaign advertisements for Haynes, Rowe, and Flores (Table 2).

***Table 1: Education Reform Now Advocacy contributions to Raising Colorado***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| Education Reform Now Advocacy | 04/27/2015  09/24/2015  10/13/2015  10/14/2015 | $100,000.00  $150,000.00  $50,000.00  $75,000.00 |

***Table 2: Raising Colorado Expenditure Totals for 2015 Denver School Board Candidates***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate | Date | Expenditure |
| Allegra “Happy” Hanes | 11/23/2015  11/23/2015  10/25/2015  10/28/2015  10/05/2015 | $11,305.84  $9,746.10  $39,466,96  $15,318.25  $12,457.58 |
| Lisa Flores | 11/23/2015  10/05/2015  10/05/2015  10/12/2015  10/12/2015  10/25/2015  10/28/2015  09/21/2015  09/30/2015 | $3,500.00  $14,277.66  $13,651.80  $13,651.80  $13,651.80  $14,547.00  $14,547.00  $51,685.00  $14,277.66 |
| Ann Rowe | 11/23/2015  10/05/2015  10/12/2015  10/12/2015  10/28/2015  09/21/2015 | $3,500.00  $14,391.65  $14,391.65  $13,506.01  $14,391.65  $21,705.00 |

Aside from *Raising Colorado’s* independent expenditures on behalf of Haynes, Rowe, and Flores, all three received a number of notable direct contributions from both in-state and out-of-state corporate reform supporters (Tables 3 – 7). Among the Colorado contributors are established Colorado corporate reform donors Anschutz, Fox, Gary, Hamill, Ritchie, Thiry, and Younggren, who also made headlines for their [contributions to the 2013 school board race](http://www.westword.com/news/dps-school-board-race-fundraising-whos-getting-big-bucks-from-phil-anschutz-5870858).[Gary](http://www.garycommunity.org/our-history/ccn-quote) helped create charter schools; [Scanavino](http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2015/12/04/happy-haynes-raised-and-spent-big-money-in-final-days-of-denver-school-board-campaign/) and [Ritchie](http://www.leg.state.co.us/preclics/1998/hres98/hjr1035.htm) are charter school founders; [Thiry](http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2017/04/10/cary-kennedy-jumps-into-colorado-governors-race-citing-need-to-pay-teachers-as-professionals/) funds charter schools; while [Stryker](http://www.forbes.com/profile/pat-stryker/) is a local billionaire involved in venture capitalism.

Out-of-state contributions include New York billionaire [Michael Bloomberg](http://www.forbes.com/profile/michael-bloomberg/), KIPP charter board member [Katherine Bradley](http://www.kipp.org/kipp-foundation/kipp-board-of-directors/), Charter School Growth Fund board member [Stacy Schusterman](http://chartergrowthfund.org/people/), and Paypal/Linkedin co-founder [Reid Hoffman](https://hbr.org/2016/04/blitzscaling) and his wife, [Michelle Yee](https://www.celebfamily.com/internet/reid-hoffman-family.html).

***Table 3: Notable Out-of-State Contributors to 2015 Denver School Board “At Large” Candidate, Happy Haynes***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| Michael Bloomberg | 10/29/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| Reid Hoffman | 10/21/2015 | $4,000.00 |
| Michelle Yee | 10/21/2015 | $4,000.00 |

***Table 4: Notable In-State Contributors to 2015 Denver School Board “At Large” Candidate, Happy Haynes***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| John Fox | 10/23/2015 | $1,000.00 |
| Samuel Gary | 10/21/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| Patrick Hamill | 10/23/2015 | $2,500.00 |
| Daniel Ritchie | 10/20/2015 | $2,500.00 |
| David Scanavino | 10/27/2015 | $8,000.00 |
| Pat Stryker | 10/28/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| Kent Thiry | 10/20/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| David Younggren | 10/08/2015  10/22/2015 | $1,000.00  $1,000.00 |

***Table 5: Notable In-State Contributors to 2015 Denver School Board District 1 Candidate, Ann Rowe***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| DFER Colorado | 10/15/2015  10/15/2015 | $200.00  $300.00 |
| Daniel Ritchie | 08/31/2015 | $2,500.00 |
| Kent Thiry | 10/20/2015 | $2,500.00 |
| David Younggren | 08/15/2015 | $1,000.00 |

***Table 6: Notable Out-of-State Contributors to 2015 Denver School Board District 5 Candidate, Lisa Flores***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| Katherine Bradley | 08/06/2015 | $2,000.00 |
| Philip Reyes | 08/05/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| Reid Hoffman | 10/21/2015 | $4,000.00 |
| Michelle Yee | 10/20/2015 | $4,000.00 |
| Sheryl Sandberg | 08/20/2015 | $2,000.00 |
| George Sepulvida | 07/28/2015 | $2,000.00 |
| Stacy Schusterman | 08/20/2015 | $5,000.00 |

***Table 7: Notable In-State Contributors to 2015 Denver School Board District 5 Candidate, Lisa Flores***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Contributor | Date | Amount |
| DFER Colorado | 10/15/2015 | $1,000.00 |
| Philip Anschutz | 10/15/2015 | $2,000.00 |
| Daniel Ritchie | 09/09/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| David Scanavino | 10/27/2015 | $2,000.00 |
| Kent Thiry | 10/20/2015 | $5,000.00 |
| David Youngren | 06/29/2015 | $1,000.00 |

***Table 8: Top Five Out-of-State Contributors in the 2015 Denver School Board Race***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Contributor** | **Total Amount** |
| Education Reform Now | $375,000.00 |
| Reid Hoffman/Michelle Yee | $8,000.00 |
| Michael Bloomberg | $5,000.00 |
| Philip Reyes | $5,000.00 |
| Stacy Schusterman | $5,000.00 |

***Table 9: Top Five In-State Contributors in the 2015 Denver School Board Race***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Contributor** | **Total Amount** |
| Kent Thiry | $12,500.00 |
| Daniel Ritchie | $10,000.00 |
| David Scanavina | $10,000.00 |
| Pat Stryker | $5,000.00 |
| Samuel Gary | $5,000.00 |

In the end, the three candidates supported by corporate-reform-promoting billionaires and their advocacy groups won their 2015 Denver school board seats, with the Haynes/Speth race for District 5 being the closest.

The 2015 Denver School Board election was the culmination of more than a decade’s worth of efforts by in and out of state billionaire school reformers, who sought to remake public education using a corporate model.