



Denver School Board 2015: Billionaire Dollars Ensure School Board Majority in Reform-friendly District

The November 3, 2015, Denver School Board election 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](#) (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, of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, [said that Denver was seen nationally as a “promising place”](#) for school reform and that there was a lot of interest in ensuring that the school board had a strong “pro-reform stance.”

Money from out-of-state reform-minded billionaires began flowing into Denver starting in 2002, when the [Los Angeles based Broad Foundation gave Denver Public Schools \\$1.7 million](#) for a teacher performance pay system based on student test scores.

The billionaires’ agenda took off when the Denver School Board chose Michael Bennet as Superintendent of Schools in 2005. Like Joel Klein in New York City, Bennet had no background in public education – [he came from a local investment firm](#) where he turned around failing companies.

Bennet began closing Denver schools almost immediately. [According to Education Next](#), 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. In the portfolio model, the school board sees itself as a person who owns a stock portfolio - sell the losers, hold on to the winners, buy new stocks, sell off the losers again, etc. Constant turmoil and disruption. 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 called A+ Denver ([now known as A+ Colorado](#)). [A+ Denver was created](#) “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](#) 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.” It was a formula for chaos by design.

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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 Bennet/Boasberg agenda.

The contest for the District 5 seat was between Lisa Flores, who supported the billionaires’ 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.

For the at-large and District 1 seats, incumbents Happy Haynes and Ann Rowe were running for re-election; [both Haynes and Rowe supported](#) teacher pay-for-performance, school enrollment zones, and providing facilities for charter schools 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.

Haynes was pitted against Robert Speth for the at-large seat, and Rowe against Kristi Butkovich for the District 1 seat. [Speth was a parent of Denver public school children](#), 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. He opposed the influence of the Relay Graduate School of Education in the district, a charter-school sponsored fast-track course of studies based on “no-excuses” teaching practices.

Butkovich was a [third generation DPS graduate](#), who was an opt-out activist and a founder of a pro-public education group, the [Denver Alliance for Public Education](#). The wife of a retired teacher and administrator, she was also outspoken about her belief that there was a 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).

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.

According to its 2014 990 tax form, 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. 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).

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Table 1: Education Reform Now Advocacy contributions to Raising Colorado

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Education Reform Now Advocacy	04/27/2015	\$100,000.00
	09/24/2015	\$150,000.00
	10/13/2015	\$50,000.00
	10/14/2015	\$75,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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

CANDIDATE	DATE	EXPENDITURE
Allegra "Happy" Hanes	11/23/2015	\$11,305.84
	11/23/2015	\$9,746.10
	10/25/2015	\$39,466.96
	10/28/2015	\$15,318.25
	10/05/2015	\$12,457.58
Lisa Flores	11/23/2015	\$3,500.00
	10/05/2015	\$14,277.66
	10/05/2015	\$13,651.80
	10/12/2015	\$13,651.80
	10/12/2015	\$13,651.80
	10/25/2015	\$14,547.00
	10/28/2015	\$14,547.00
	09/21/2015	\$51,685.00
09/30/2015	\$14,277.66	
Ann Rowe	11/23/2015	\$3,500.00
	10/05/2015	\$14,391.65
	10/12/2015	\$14,391.65
	10/12/2015	\$13,506.01
	10/28/2015	\$14,391.65
	09/21/2015	\$21,705.00
	Total	\$323,970.41

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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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 Philip Anschutz, John Fox, Samuel Gary, Patrick Hamill, Daniel Ritchie, Kent Thiry, and David Younggren, who also made headlines for their [contributions to the 2013 school board race](#). [Gary](#) helped create charter

schools; David [Scanavino](#) and [Ritchie](#) are charter school founders; [Thiry](#) funds charter schools; and Pat Stryker is a local billionaire involved in venture capitalism.

Out-of-state contributions include Michael Bloomberg, KIPP charter board member [Katherine Bradley](#), [Stacy Schusterman](#), and Paypal/LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman and his wife, Michelle Yee.

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

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
DFER Colorado	10/15/2015	\$200.00
	10/15/2015	\$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

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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 Sepulveda	07/28/2015	\$2,000.00
Stacy Schusterman	08/20/2015	\$5,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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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 Younggren	06/29/2015	\$1,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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

CONTRIBUTOR	TOTAL AMOUNT
Rising Colorado (ERNA)	\$323,970.41
Reid Hoffman/Michelle Yee	\$16,000.00
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 Scanavino	\$10,000.00
Pat Stryker	\$5,000.00
Samuel Gary	\$5,000.00

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In the end, Haynes, Rowe and Flores, 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.

Denver School Board 2017

During the 2017 Denver school board election, ERNA gave \$625,000 to Raising Colorado (Table 10). In turn, Raising Colorado spent just shy of \$400,000 on behalf of four candidates: Barbara O'Brien for the at-large seat, Angela Cobian in District 2, Mike Johnson in District 3, and Rachele Espiritu in District 4 (Table 11).

Although ERNA increased their expenditures on behalf of pro-reform candidates, only half of their candidates were successful. Incumbents Mike Johnson and Rachele Espiritu both lost their elections by thousands of votes, ending the two-year lock corporate reformers enjoyed on all 7 board seats.

The four ERNA supported candidates also received direct contributions from Bruce Benson, the president of the University of Colorado and a former oilman and GOP fundraiser. At the behest of then DPS Superintendent

Michael Bennet, Benson encouraged a group of deep-pocketed Republicans to make unprecedented contributions in the 2011 and 2013 DPS elections.

Other notable contributors in the 2017 election were Colorado billionaires Phillip Anschutz and Kenneth Tuchman, and out-of-state billionaires John Arnold of Texas and Alice, Jim and Steuart Walton of Arkansas.

Public education advocates were encouraged that Big Money did not prevail in all four races, particularly in District 3, where teacher Carrie Owens was outspent by 3 to 1 but still triumphed over incumbent Mike Johnson. Former DPS board member Jeannie Kaplan believes that the election shifted because residents have become more engaged after years of anti-public school reform efforts. It may be "[the beginning of the pendulum swing](#)," Kaplan said. ■

Table 10: Education Reform Now Advocacy contributions to Raising Colorado

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Education Reform Now Advocacy	09/14/2017	\$325,000.00
	09/28/2017	\$300,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 11: Raising Colorado Expenditure Totals for 2017 Denver School Board Candidates

CANDIDATE	DATE	EXPENDITURE
Rachele C. Espiritu	09/28/2017	\$13,636.32
	09/28/2017	\$11,966.01
	10/05/2017	\$10,759.31
	10/05/2017	\$10,759.31
	10/05/2017	\$10,759.31
	09/28/2017	\$36.00
	10/06/2017	\$3,554.95
	11/06/2017	\$6,155.07
	11/07/2017	\$4,183.89
	10/27/2017	\$9,268.80
	10/27/2017	\$3,281.74
	10/27/2017	\$13,765.83
	11/01/2017	\$16.00
	11/01/2017	\$10,186.09
	11/07/2017	\$4,605.98
	10/27/2017	\$350.00
	11/07/2017	\$522.66
	10/16/2017	\$13,368.41
	10/23/2017	\$9,596.77
	10/18/2017	\$6,783.24
10/23/2017	\$5,951.04	
Angela Cobian	09/28/2017	\$10,586.72
	10/10/2017	\$10,586.72
	10/10/2017	\$9,334.93
	10/10/2017	\$9,334.93
	09/28/2017	\$36.00
	10/06/2017	\$596.36
	11/06/2017	\$3,500.00
	11/01/2017	\$16.00
	10/30/2017	\$2,368.83
	11/01/2017	\$3,998.46
	11/07/2017	\$3,538.05
	11/07/2017	\$332.73
	10/23/2017	\$17,741.20
	10/18/2017	\$5,743.29
	10/23/2017	\$2,799.11

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Table 11 continued: Raising Colorado Expenditure Totals for 2017 Denver School Board Candidates

CANDIDATE	DATE	EXPENDITURE
Mike Johnson	09/28/2017	\$13,514.81
	10/05/2017	\$10,659.46
	09/28/2017	\$36.00
	10/06/2017	\$820.08
	11/01/2017	\$16.00
	10/30/2017	\$1,531.96
	11/01/2017	\$2,118.52
	11/07/2017	\$2,611.32
	10/23/2017	\$12,732.16
	10/18/2017	\$3,096.76
	10/23/2017	\$1,918.63
Barbara Jack O'Brien	10/05/2017	\$33,748.87
	09/28/2017	\$36.00
	10/06/2017	\$3,579.34
	11/01/2017	\$16.00
	10/30/2017	\$2,194.95
	11/01/2017	\$3,345.88
	11/07/2017	\$2,495.22
	11/07/2017	\$632.10
	10/12/2017	\$26,245.99
	10/23/2017	\$25,864.66
	10/18/2017	\$5,620.14
10/23/2017	\$2,935.63	
Oppose Jennifer Bacon	10/27/2017	\$13,765.83
	Total	\$399,556.37

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 12: Notable In-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board District 4 Candidate, Rachele C. Espiritu

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Democrats For Education	10/01/2017	\$4,000.00
Reform Colorado Political Committee	09/12/2017 08/29/2017	\$500.00 \$250.00
Philip Anschutz	09/25/2017	\$2,000.00
Bruce Benson	10/24/2017	\$10,000.00
Pat Hamill	10/19/2017 09/13/2017	\$5,000.00 \$2,500.00
Kenneth Tuchman	10/25/2017	\$2,500.00
Steven Halstedt	10/25/2017	\$1,500.00
James Q. Crowe	10/10/2017	\$5,000.00
Scott Reiman	10/01/2017	\$5,000.00
Daniel Ritchie	07/03/2017	\$5,000.00
Samuel & Nancy Gary	08/21/2017	\$2,500.00
Cathey Finlon	07/24/2017	\$1,000.00
Justin L. Jaschke	09/12/2017	\$1,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

Table 13: Notable Out-of-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board District 2 Candidate, Angela Cobian

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Arthur Rock	09/08/2017 11/01/2017	\$10,000.00 \$10,000.00
Steuart Walton	11/16/2017	\$5,000.00
Alice Walton	11/16/2017	\$3,000.00
Jim Walton	11/16/2017	\$3,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 14: Notable In-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board District 2 Candidate, Angela Cobian

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Kenneth Tuchman	10/30/2017	\$2,500.00
Democrats For Education Reform	09/20/2017	\$500.00
Colorado Political Committee	09/11/2017	\$500.00
Cathey Finlon	07/16/2017	\$1,000.00
Justin Jaschke	09/08/2017	\$1,000.00
James Crowe	10/05/2017	\$1,500.00
Steven Halstedt	09/14/2017	\$1,500.00
Catherine Abarca	09/09/2017	\$2,500.00
Marco Abarca	07/25/2017	\$2,500.00
Samuel Gary	08/08/2017	\$2,500.00
Patrick Hamill	09/12/2017	\$2,500.00
Bruce Benson	08/23/2017	\$5,000.00
Scott Reiman	10/02/2017	\$5,000.00
Daniel Ritchie	06/28/2017	\$5,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

Table 15: Notable Out-of-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board "At-Large" Candidate, Barbara Jack O'Brien

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Leslie Jacobs	09/27/2017	\$1,000.00
DFER	09/12/2017	\$500.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 16: Notable In-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board “At-Large” Candidate, Barbara Jack O’Brien

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Bruce Benson	07/27/2017	\$10,000.00
Daniel Ritchie	06/28/2017	\$5,000.00
Samuel Gary	06/20/2017	\$2,500.00
Patrick Hamill	06/13/2017 09/12/2017	\$5,000.00 \$2,500.00
David Younggren	08/09/2017 10/04/2017	\$1,000.00 \$1,000.00
Susan Halstedt	08/18/2017	\$2,500.00
Scott Reiman	10/02/2017	\$5,000.00
Philip Anschutz	09/25/2017	\$5,000.00
Debra Tuchman	10/25/2017	\$2,500.00
James Crowe	10/09/2017	\$2,500.00
Chris Watney	07/20/2017 08/16/2017	\$1,000.00 \$1,000.00
Justin Jaschke	09/08/2017	\$1,000.00
Cathey Finlon	07/16/2017	\$1,000.00
Marco Abarca	06/20/2017	\$1,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 17: Notable In-State Contributors to 2017 Denver School Board District 3 Candidate, Mike Johnson

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Philip Anschutz	11/09/2017	\$5,000.00
David Youngren	10/05/2017	\$4,000.00
Patrick Hamill	10/04/2017	\$2,500.00
Samuel Gary	10/07/2017 10/04/2017	\$2,500.00 \$2,500.00
Susan Halstedt	10/07/2017	\$1,500.00
DFER	09/12/2017	\$500.00
Bruce Benson	10/27/2017	\$10,000.00
Scott Reiman	10/25/2017	\$5,000.00
Kenneth Tuchman	10/24/2017	\$2,500.00
Marco Abarca	08/18/2017	\$1,000.00
James Q. Crowe	10/11/2017	\$1,000.00
Cathey Finlon	07/15/2017	\$1,000.00
Steven Halstedt	07/05/2017	\$1,000.00
Justin Jaschke	09/12/2017	\$1,000.00
Daniel Ritchie	06/28/2017 10/03/2017	\$1,000.00 \$1,000.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

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Table 18: Top Five Out-of-State Contributors in the 2017 Denver School Board Race

CONTRIBUTOR	TOTAL AMOUNT
Raising Colorado (ERNA)	\$399,556.37
Arthur Rock	\$20,000.00
Walton Family	\$11,000.00
Leslie Jacobs	\$1,000.00
DFER	\$500.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)

Table 19: Top Five In-State Contributors in the 2017 Denver School Board Race

CONTRIBUTOR	TOTAL AMOUNT
Bruce Benson	\$35,000.00
Scott Reiman	\$20,000.00
Patrick Hamill	\$20,000.00
Daniel Ritchie	\$17,000.00
Samuel Gary	\$12,500.00

Source: Colorado Secretary of State TRACER (Transparency in Contribution and Expenditure Reporting)