



Minneapolis, Minnesota: Billionaire-backed Reform Organization Funnel Cash into School Board Race

The Minneapolis, Minnesota, Board of Education consists of [9 members](#), including one elected to represent each of the 6 districts as well as 3 elected at-large. Terms are for four years. In 2014, five seats were up for election: Districts 1, 3, 5, and two at-large seats.

The two at-large seats were the focus of big outside money, and Iris Altamirano and Don Samuels were the chosen reform candidates. Both earned the [endorsement of Minnesota's major paper](#), the *Star Tribune*, as well. The editorial board claimed Altamirano and Samuels were the candidates "most likely to be change agents."

Altamirano, a relative unknown, was silent on issues of charter schools and focused on the need to improve the city's public schools. [Don Samuels' 2014 declared platform](#) made it clear that he supported high performing charter schools, as well as shutting down low-performing charter schools. He also supported standardized testing and TFA.

Nevertheless, major outside money poured into the election to support Altamirano and Samuels via an independent committee, the Minnesota Progressive Education Fund (MPEF).

The chair of MPEF was MinnCAN Executive Director, [Daniel Sellers](#). MinnCAN is the state branch of 50CAN - The 50 State Campaign for Achievement Now - the national organization that actively promotes school choice, including charters and vouchers. Sellers, who joined MinnCAN in 2012, had previously served as the founding Executive Director of Teach for America - Twin Cities. When MinnCAN launched in 2011, the [Star Tribune dubbed the organization](#) "one of the loudest voices for reform."

MPEF raised a total of \$233,500 in support of [Altamirano and Samuels](#). [Three out of state donors contributed \\$215,000](#): Michael Bloomberg, Arthur Rock and Jon Sackler (Table 1).

Table 1: Out-of-State Contributions to the Minnesota Progressive Education Fund

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Michael Bloomberg	10/20/2014	\$100,000.00
Arthur Rock	09/29/2014	\$90,000.00
Jon Sackler	10/14/2014	\$25,000.00

Source: Hennepin County Election Campaign Finance website

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The in-state donations to MPEF were modest, but their sources suggest that the local push behind MPEF was related to charter school expansion (Table 2).

Table 2: In-State Contributions to the Minnesota Progressive Education Fund

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Addison Piper	09/22/2014	\$1,000.00
Albert Fan	09/02/2014	\$500.00
Michael and Ann Ciresi	09/28/2014	\$10,000.00
Benson Whitney	10/24/2014	\$5,000.00

Source: Hennepin County Election Campaign Finance website

In-state donors were [MinnCAN board member, Addison Piper](#), who contributed \$1,000, and [MinnCAN's board chair, Benson Whitney](#), who contributed \$5,000. Minneapolis based [Charter School Partners Executive Director, Al Fan](#) gave another \$500.

In September of 2013, MinnCAN published a report titled, *Fulfilling the Promise of Charter Schools*. The report concluded that it was time for Minnesota to reclaim its place "as a trailblazer of the charter school movement and the students they serve." Just one month later the [Walton Foundation named Charter School Partners' Al Fan an "Education Reformer to Watch"](#). The Foundation praised Fan for working with other groups to "close the achievement gap in Minneapolis by growing high-quality charter schools."

When MPEF's filing reports became public just prior to the election, [In These Times reporter Sarah Lahm](#) speculated that Bloomberg, Rock and Sackler were interested in the

school board race because the district had just entered into a district-charter compact with a local charter chain.

Lahm reported that the compact with the local chain was the outcome of the [2010 Minneapolis District-Charter Collaboration Compact](#). Minneapolis's compact was one of nine in cities across the nation, an initiative conceived and funded by the Gates Foundation. The Gates compact, worth \$100,000, was awarded to districts to guarantee that charters were given the same status as public schools. The Minneapolis Foundation was tapped to manage the compact.

Michael Ciresi, the largest in-state donor to the Compact fund, is a prominent Minnesota lawyer with the law firm of Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi. On her blog, Bright Lights Small City, [Lahm further explains](#) that the seed money that gave life to the Minneapolis Foundation was the same money that brought MinnCAN, Teach for America and Students for Education Reform (SFER) to Minneapolis. The

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seed money came from Michael Ciresi’s firm, Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi. Flush with hundreds of millions of dollars from fees earned in a \$6.6 billion dollar tobacco settlement, the firm’s Foundation, the Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi Foundation for Children, funded a web of Minneapolis reform organizations.

MPEF was not the only group in this web to funnel outside funds into the 2014 Minneapolis school board race. Students for Education Reform, which has been called an “education reform front” for Democrats for Education Reform, raised over \$25,000 in direct contributions and another \$35,000 in in-kind support.

California investment banker and businessman Adam Cieth was the [main contributor to SFER’s efforts](#) in Minneapolis. [Cieth, a supporter of charter schools, is on SFER’s board.](#) He is also on the board of Leadership Public Schools, a San Francisco Charter Management Organization, and he is on the Leadership Council for the [NewSchools Venture Fund](#), a California based venture philanthropy non-profit that finances charter schools around the country, including Minneapolis.

Table 3: Out-of-State Contributions to the Students for Education Reform (SFER) Action Network Fund

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Adam Cieth	12/12/2013	\$23,500.00

Source: [Hennepin County Election Campaign Finance website](#)

The sole in-state donation to SFER from an individual came from [MinnCAN board chair, Benson Whitney](#). MPEF and 50CAN provided the approximately \$35,000 worth of in-kind support to SFER.

Table 4: In-State Contributions and In-Kind Contributions to Students for Education Reform (SFER) Action Network Fund

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Benson Whitney	07/15/2014	\$2,500.00
Minneapolis Progressive Education Fund	08/11/2014	\$10,638.00
	11/12/2014	\$1,852.48
	12/01/2014	\$6,845.87

Source: [Hennepin County Election Campaign Finance website](#)

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And still more money came into the race via a local offshoot of 50CAN, the 50CAN Action Fund. The group was registered to Vallay Varo, the founding Executive Director of MinnCAN and the current President of 50CAN nationally. 50CAN Action Fund registered with a Minneapolis mailing address, 2800

University Ave SE, Suite 202. This is the same address [MPEF](#) used to register their committee, and the same mailing address used by [MinnCAN](#) and Al Fan's [Charter School Partners](#). 50CAN Action Fund was also the [recipient of California billionaire Arthur Rock's largesse](#).

Table 5: Out-of-State Contributions and In-Kind Expenditures to the 50CAN Action Fund

CONTRIBUTOR	DATE	AMOUNT
Arthur Rock	05/15/2014	\$10,000.00
SFER Action Network, Inc. (New York address)	07/10/2014	\$4,350.00
	06/29/2014	\$6,996.80
	07/29/2014	\$9,417.20
	08/11/2014	\$1,160.00
	08/09/2014	\$8,639.80
50CAN Action Fund Inc. (Washington D.C. address)	05/31/2014	\$371.89
	06/30/2014	\$1,848.60
	07/29/2014	\$1,316.41
	10/31/2014	\$457.97

Source: [Hennepin County Election Campaign Finance website](#)

In the end, the result was mixed; Altamirano failed to unseat incumbent Gagnon, but Samuels was elected. Shortly after the election a [Star Tribune analysis](#) showed that Minnesota charters are no panacea, and in fact they are "failing to hit learning

targets" and "not achieving adequate academic growth." Nevertheless, charter growth continues, with 5 new charters opening in the Minneapolis area in the fall of 2017. ■