



School board elections are supposed to be quintessential America contests. Moms and Main Street small-business owners and retired teachers campaign by knocking on doors, writing letters to the editor and debating at elementary schools. Then friends and neighbors troop to the polls and make their choices.

But what happens when [all the pathologies of national politics](#)—over-the-top spending by wealthy elites and corporate interests, partisan consultants jetting in to shape big-lie messaging, media outlets that cover spin rather than substance—are visited on a local school board contest?

[Emily Sirota](#) is finding out.

The mom of 10-month-old Isaac, [Sirota's a social worker](#) and community organizer with a degree from the University of Denver and a history of working in the community. She's running for a seat representing southeast Denver on the city's school board in one of three school board contests that the city's voters will decide November 1.

If Sirota wins, her election would in all likelihood shift control of the nonpartisan board, which is [currently split 4–3](#) in favor of so-called “reformers,” who critics describe as “the forces trying to charter-ize, voucher-ize and privatize public schools.”

Sirota makes no secret of her desire to turn the board that runs one of the nation's largest urban schools systems toward a more clearly defined position in favor of funding local schools, paying teachers and school staff a fair wage and working to close achievement gaps that have developed along racial and economic lines.

In simplest terms, she's [a pro-public education candidate](#)—like school board candidates in

Big Money, Bad Media, Secret Agenda: Welcome to America's Wildest School Board Race

Written by John Nichols | The Nation
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Denver and communities across the country generally tended to be before big money and a broken media system began warping our politics not just in Washington but right down to the grassroots.

“I believe high quality public education is the cornerstone of strong and healthy communities,” says Sirota. “I want our schools to challenge and nourish all of our children, providing them with the most optimal educational conditions to grow and become life-long learners.”

Not exactly a radical position.

But Sirota, who crafted education policy as an aide to Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer, raises smart questions about so-called “school choice” and “charter school” initiatives that can—when they are designed by special-interest groups—divert funding and attention from neighborhood schools. And she is blunt in her opposition to using public money to pay for voucher programs.

“I believe we need to invest more in our public school system, not less—and, as a candidate for Denver Public School Board in the upcoming 2011 elections, I believe we need new Denver School Board members who are crystal clear in their opposition to vouchers,” says Sirota. “Make no mistake about it: my longtime opposition to vouchers has always been driven by the cold hard data. In other words, it comes in response to what we know vouchers will do to our community, and what they have already done to other communities.”

That kind of talk does not go down well with national groups that are promoting the school-choice, school-vouchers, school-privatization agenda.

Suddenly, Sirota finds facing not just a more conservative opponent but a full frontal assault from regional and national forces seeking to radically remake our education system.

When financial reports were filed for the three Denver School Board races that will be on the November 1 ballot, they revealed that more than \$600,000 had flowed into the competition. And that number is expected to skyrocket as voting day approaches.

Sirota’s opponent (former investment banker [Anne Rowe](#), who now owns a publishing

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concern) secured [a 3-1 fund-raising advantage](#). Rowe did this not so much by attracting support from within the district but by filling a \$176,320 campaign treasury with money from big donors who, in several cases, have ties to groups that promote charter schools and vouchers. Sirota's opponent received a \$25,000 check from oil-industry CEO Henry Gordon, an \$11,000 check from healthcare industry CEO Kent Thiry, a \$10,000 check from former Colorado GOP chair Bruce Benson and \$10,000 from financial executive Scott Reiman.

Big donors Gordon and Reiman are board members of the [Alliance for Choice in Education](#), which promotes private school vouchers.

Tens of thousands of additional dollars have come to the aid of Sirota's opponent via the deceptively dubbed [Stand for Children](#) group, which campaigns for charter schools and vouchers. Stand for Children has formally endorsed Rowe, as has the group "Democrats for Education Reform" (DFER). "DFER's endgame has little to do with learning and everything to do with marginalizing public-sector unionized workers and bringing down the cost of taxes for social programs," notes [the United Federation of Teachers](#), which has long tracked the group funded by conservative hedge-fund managers. "It's about creating new business and investment opportunities in areas that are still publicly run and serving as a pre-emptive strike against any hope for private-sector union renewal."

The big-money interests are taking advantage of a loophole in Colorado election law, which imposes donation limits on every Colorado race—from contests for local posts to statewide positions—except local school-board campaigns. Colorado state Representative Beth McCann, a Democrat who is seeking to close the loophole, says: "School board races, especially in Denver, have become very polarizing," [McCann said](#). "It creates the potential for it to be about whoever can get the most money. It's what we were trying to avoid."

But McCann's fix has yet to be implemented. And the whole infrastructure of donation and spending limits, not just in Colorado but nationally, is threatened by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling.

So Sirota is on her own in the fight with the big money.

In contrast to the big money from outside the district, and in some cases outside Denver, [Sirota](#)

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[a has collected \\$57,962](#)

, with substantial support coming from teachers, school employees and their allies in the community. Sirota's gotten some money from out-of-town family and friends. But the disproportionality, and the intent of the big donors to influence the policy of a local school board, is obvious.

Or maybe not.

In the none-too-distant past, if millionaires and national political players swept into a community to try and buy a seat on the school board, that would have been big news.

But in Denver, most of the media coverage is treating this year's school board races as a balanced contest between "reformers" and "opponents of reform."

Much of the media imagines the [Denver Classroom Teachers Association](#) as the serious special-interest player in the race while the big-donors and the out-of-state "think tanks" and "advocacy groups" that have jumped into the race are generously portrayed as do-gooders.

The vapid nature of the coverage is not surprising. Denver lost one of its two daily newspapers, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Rocky Mountain News*, in February 2009, as a wave of closures and cutbacks swept the country. Those closures and cutbacks created the greatest void when it comes to coverage of local government and school board affairs. And Denver has clearly suffered, as the void has been filled by advertising, spin and "news" websites funded by grants from conservative foundations or sponsored by groups such as the Colorado League for Charter Schools.

When Sirota's husband, progressive author and commentator David Sirota (whom I have known and respected since his days as an aide to Congressman David Obey, D-Wisconsin), raised questions on his radio show about the big-money donors in the school board races, he was ridiculed in the local press.

David Sirota observed with regard to the \$10,000 and \$25,000 checks: "That kind of money

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doesn't go into a school board because they want to help the children...." Those words earned Sirota a rebuke from the city's most prominent media outlet, the *Denver Post*.

Under the headline, "[David Sirota's Loopy Take on a School Election](#)," *Post* columnist Vincent Carroll wrote: "Sirota's performance on his show today was nonetheless shocking for his refusal to credit wealthy donors with any genuine interest in the welfare of children or in improving urban education. Their involvement, apparently, is totally cynical."

Carroll dismissed as "preposterous" David Sirota's suggestion that, with massive infusions of money from donors closely tied to groups that favor vouchers and privatization, Denver might be witnessing "part of a movement of the rich to try to destroy our public institutions."

Preposterous? Hundreds of thousands of Americans are in the streets, as part of the Occupy Wall Street and 99 Percent movements, to suggest that this precisely the sort of pay-to-play politics that frightens Americans.

To his credit, Carroll (an able writer who I have read since his days with the *Rocky Mountain News*) attached a response from David Sirota to his online column. Carroll acknowledged that he was unaware of the details that Sirota shared regarding the push for vouchers and privatization in Denver. Yet, Carroll concluded, "I remain unimpressed with the idea that a donor's link to a group that supports broad school choice necessarily means that person is working on behalf of vouchers in Denver."

So much for skepticism about the motivations of wealthy political donors—at least in Denver.

Those of us who fret about the collapse of the news media's watchdog role, and about the overwhelming influence of big money on all of our politics, from presidential races to school-board contests, will be excused, however, if we worry about what's happening in Denver.

Nonpartisan school board races are supposed to be about grassroots politics and human-level

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connections made at the doors between candidates and voters. The pattern that is developing in Denver—and that can be found on display in too many other communities across the country—threatens to collapse that connection, under the weight of big-money, consultant-driven campaigning and media that confuse skepticism with stenography.

Link to article in [Nation of Change](#)

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