

Democrats for Education Reform

A new grassroots lobbying group plans to shake up its party's positions on education

WHITNEY TILSON HAS HAD ENOUGH when it comes to Democratic opposition to education reforms. “There are millions of kids out there who are being failed by the system, and our party is looking the other way. It’s morally bankrupt and politically suicidal, and you can quote me on that,” he says.

Tilson, a hedge fund manager and longtime Democratic funder and activist, is looking to shake up his party’s positions on education by co-founding Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a new grassroots lobbying, funding and advocacy group that plans to challenge the entrenched party power of teachers’ unions and other education sector interests, who largely define the official Democratic position on education issues. DFER believes that high standards, innovation and accountability for success—qualities in short supply among the establishment—are essential for fueling excellence in education and giving all children an equal opportunity to succeed.

Tilson’s education reform credentials date back 18 years when he was among the first employees of Teach For America, helping to recruit the first class of campus coordinators for this national teacher corps of recent college graduates who commit to teaching in hard-to-staff schools across the country. He then departed for business school and, in the 1990s, started his

own hedge fund. But he got back into education in a big way in 1999, when as a board member for an organization focused on the economies of big cities, he visited a KIPP public charter school in New York. The experience was



*Whitney Tilson,
Democrats for Education Reform*

“electrifying,” he said, and he joined the school’s board. It was through that experience that the seeds of his later engagement with DFER were planted.

KIPP and Achievement First, both nationally recognized charter school models that have had success in raising the academic achievement of inner-city students, “applied to open new charter schools in New York,” recounts Tilson. “I figured the city would rush to approve the applications, and I was taken aback by the opposition. And I began to

realize to my horror that a lot of that opposition came from my own party.”

The experience cemented Tilson’s guiding principle: It’s the system, stupid. “Grassroots efforts such as Teach For America are critical, and groups like that do amazing work. But in the end the tragedy is not that there are thousands of kids needing to be saved, but millions of kids needing to be saved.... You have to fix this broken system. And the Democratic Party, sadly, is the principal defender of this system.”

Among other Democratic reformers joining Tilson in co-founding DFER are R. Boykin Curry IV and John Petry. Curry helps manage \$6 billion for high net worth individuals and institutions as a partner at Eagle Capital, a New York investment firm. He is also a founding board member of Girls Prep, a public charter school for inner-city New York girls, and a board member of Alliance for School Choice, a leading national advocacy organization for parental choice. Petry has been a partner at Gotham Capital in New York since 1997. He co-founded the Harlem Success Charter School and currently serves as the treasurer of the school’s board of trustees.

The challenge facing these reformers can’t be understated. While any number of Democrats have broken ranks on education reform in recent years—think of figures such as Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under Bill Clinton, who came out for “progress-

sive vouchers” in a famous *Wall Street Journal* op-ed—the fact remains that some of the most active constituents of the Democratic coalition are teachers’ unions and related ed-sector employees.

DFER is all about providing a “safe landing” to Democrats who think differently on education, but feel cowed by interests within the Democratic party, said Kevin Chavous, a former Washington, D.C., city councilman who instigated the group’s founding and serves as board chair. Once he left the city council—after losing an election in which his pro-reform views, including his support for vouchers, were a key issue—Chavous said that he was amazed at the number of fellow Democrats who admitted that they agreed with him privately, but couldn’t talk about reform in public.

“When Democratic politicians start moving up the ranks, they have to compromise on choice, on teacher pay for performance, on charters, because of the sheer weight of union influence and the influence of the system within the party,” he said. He hopes DFER can reach out to lower-level Democratic officials and support them with money and advocacy as they move up the ranks. The group plans to actively support pro-reform candidates in Democratic primaries, write letters and position papers, develop a group of pro-reform Democratic funders, and lobby Democratic elected officials on behalf of reform issues.

Though it has largely focused its efforts in New York and New Jersey at present, cherry-picking a few key states, Chavous hopes there will eventually be DFER affiliates in every state. “There are Democrats who think like us everywhere,” said Chavous. “We want them to know that there is an institutional voice for them in the party.”

Developing a broad group of reform-minded Democrats doesn’t mean, however, that there won’t be some massaging of differences required. On vouchers, for example—an issue that Tilson describes as “the third rail of Democratic politics”—there are differences of opinion within DFER already, and likely more to come if the group grows. “Obviously, there’s a big difference between a

voucherized system that basically dismantles public education, and a carefully targeted program of vouchers for the poor and underserved,” notes Tilson.

Right now, the group’s statement of principles includes support for “mechanisms that allow parents to select excellent schools for their children, and where education dollars follow each child to their school,” but as to the specifics of those mechanisms, DFER isn’t yet taking a position. “Our feeling is, anything is on the table,” says Tilson. For now, when it comes to substantive policy, the group will likely focus on other principles, such as efforts to make schools accountable for

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success, setting rigorous national standards, and empowering principals and local elected officials to make needed changes, especially the hiring and firing of personnel.

To that end, DFER plans to build coalitions with other groups interested in education reform, such as the Council of Urban Professionals in New York City, with whom it is putting on several events. DFER also recently hosted a meeting that linked Democratic fundraisers in Brooklyn with local charter school operators. The group hopes to serve as the vehicle for introducing advocacy and hands-on education reform—including the Black Alliance for Educational Options, headed by former Milwaukee superintendent Howard Fuller—and to put its lobbying muscle to work in Albany on behalf of groups such as the New York Charter School Association and the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence.

Of equal importance to DFER, which officially launches on June 5, 2007, is reaching out to Democratic presidential candidates, all of whom are looking for ways to distinguish them-

selves from the pack. Tilson believes that with the presidential race and the effort by candidates to stake out fresh and interesting positions, “the climate is better than ever” for having a discussion on education reform in the party.

The group also plans to raise several million dollars over the next 15 months to support reform-minded Democratic candidates—and DFER members are hoping that raising those funds will create a greater willingness among candidates to speak out about their pro-reform views. “Unfortunately, we may have far more Democrats who will give money to this sort of effort than we will have deserving candidates,” notes executive director Joe Williams, a former *New York Daily News* reporter.

That being said, Tilson is enthusiastic about a new breed of Democratic politicians who have embraced progressive education reform agendas, including Governor Eliot Spitzer of New York, who recently unveiled an ambitious set of proposed reforms, including a tax deduction for private school tuition for poor and middle-class families, and Newark mayor Cory Booker, who is struggling to get control of that city’s broken school system. (Tilson has raised money for Booker, and the organization has a full-time lobbyist in Albany who helped to push for raising New York’s stringent cap on charter schools earlier this year.) Of these new Democratic leaders, he says, “It’s good to see that this issue is not necessarily fatal for a Democrat.”

Tilson takes guidance from the welfare reform battles of the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton adopted a set of reforms that had largely been generated by Republican-leaning think tanks. “What Clinton did was to take a set of ideas and not so much change them as change the way people talked about them....Language is critical. Bill Clinton was able to find Democratic idiom to talk about welfare reform issues. We’re looking for the Democrat who can be for education reform what Clinton was to welfare reform.” **P**

JUSTIN TORRES is a contributing editor to *Philanthropy*.