

Education reform group ready to play hardball

By Jim Nowlan

An Oregon-based education reform group called Stand for Children came into Illinois this election season, with a bit of financial swagger, to lay down the gauntlet in behalf of tougher teacher tenure laws, public charter schools, and expanded time on task in the classroom.

In Springfield, the group will face off against the powerful teachers' unions, which normally swat their opposition off like flies off the shirt sleeve. But Stand for Children appears to have the moxie and resources to become a real player in Illinois politics.

In the past election, Stand for Children put \$650,000 into nine competitive state legislative campaigns. With contributions of up to \$175,000 per candidate, this was huge money. Five were winners, including Richard Morthland (R-Cordova), Rep. Jehan Gordon (D-Peoria), Keith Farnham (D-Elgin), Daniel Biss (D-Skokie), and Sen. Toi Hutchinson (D-Chicago Heights).

As a result of an interview process with Stand for Children leaders, Morthland received \$25,000 from the group. Thirty-six candidates were interviewed.

Morthland agrees with Stand for Children on issues of annual teacher tenure evaluations and making it easier to fire ineffective teachers.

“I think Stand for Children will be a really good organization for Illinois because they want to be in line with the will of the people,” said Morthland, a communications instructor at Black Hawk College in Moline and also a dairy farmer.

Stand for Children started more than a decade ago as the brainchild of Jonah Edelman, a one-time community organizer and Rhodes Scholar who is the son of civil rights leader Marian Wright Edelman.

Stand was a collaborator in the movie “Waiting for Superman,” which emotionally describes the horrors faced by children in urban schools and prescribes charter school expansion as a remedy. (Charter schools are public schools that operate somewhat independently of the central school administration; the schools often have a themed focus such as math and science or the arts.)

The group also wants to make it harder to earn and keep teacher tenure and easier to fire bad teachers. Several years ago, this newspaper sponsored a series of award-winning articles by Scott Reeder, which showed that only two teachers a year were fired for incompetence, and that the cost of trying to fire a bad teacher ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

All this means that Stand for Children, along with other reform groups, will ultimately run afoul of the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association, the teachers’ unions that typically spend \$2 million each per election cycle to support a broad array of legislators.

The unions have dominated education policymaking in Illinois for years, yet they are now on the defensive as citizens become frustrated by the slow pace of school

improvement. For example, as Stand points out, only 15 percent of black students in Illinois are proficient readers at 4th grade and only 9 percent are proficient in math.

Stand for Children has grown to seven state affiliates, with Illinois being the latest. The group seeks in each state to grow local chapters of citizens who are committed to their reforms. At present, Stand is recruiting both an executive director and community organizers.

The funding for Stand is not clear, but billionaire Bill Gates and other wealthy technology leaders are thought to be among the backers of the group, which spent \$3 million to operate last year.

Among other accomplishments, Stand claims that it played “lead” and “key” roles in passage in Tennessee of legislation that requires annual evaluation of tenured teachers and in Massachusetts of a bill that doubles the percentage of students in low-performing schools with access to charter schools.

There are a number of education reform groups in Illinois. Advance Illinois, headed by former Republican governor Jim Edgar and Democrat insider and banker William Daley, is probably the best known home-grown product. But only Stand for Children is organized to do political contributing and lobbying in Springfield. If I were a state legislator (as I used to be), I would sure like to be aligned with a group that gives out huge contributions to individual candidates.

I predict that the teachers’ unions will give some ground in the coming years on issues such as teacher tenure and charter schools, in part because of the new player in Illinois called Stand for Children.