

# School of Influence

**IF YOU WERE SHAKEN A FEW WEEKS AGO WHEN THE SUPREME Court ruled in favor of unlimited corporate spending in political campaigns, get ready for another earthquake — one that could turn the Duval County public school system into a pile of rubble.**

The first big step toward ripping control of public schools from voters and giving it to Jacksonville's political elite came last Thursday. That's when the Duval County Charter Review Commission, which meets every 10 years to see if the government structure needs tweaking, recommended eliminating an elected school board.

The Commission's intent has been clear since Feb. 11, when it voted 11-3 to recommend that the elected school board be replaced with some other kind of system and designated under the control of city politicians. The commission also drafted a list of options for running Duval County schools which it will present to the Jacksonville City Council for the final decision. Those options include:

- 1) Mayoral control, in which the mayor appoints the school board (a system used in New York City and Chicago)
- 2) A charter school system to replace public schools (charter schools are funded with taxpayer money and operate without the constraints placed on public schools)
- 3) A hybrid model, with the mayor in control, but with members, half of whom are elected, the other half appointed.

Controversy swirls around similar reforms in other cities — reforms favored by the powerful corporate sector and Wall Street's hedge-fund industry. But you wouldn't know it by attending meetings of the Charter Revision Commission. In the 20 commission meetings held between June and January, commission members heard only from out-of-town "experts" who are advocates of charter schools, mayoral takeover and abolishing democratically elected school boards.

Commission Chair Wyman Duggan, who handpicked the speakers, is a lawyer with Rogers-Towers, one of the most politically well-connected law firms in the city, one deeply involved in land-use and development issues. Duggan announced on Feb. 4, four weeks before the commission's work ends, that he's done pro bono work for KIPP, the largest chain of charter schools in the United States.

The first KIPP school in Jacksonville opens in August on a Westside property that used to be the Jacksonville Kennel Club, owned by Greyhound Racing President Howard Korman, a local political rainmaker. Korman's daughter, Allison "Ali" Korman, sits on the Charter Revision Commission. She is an executive with The Stellar Group, a design-build construction and real estate development firm.

Academic researchers and critics of KIPP question the chain's claims of

achievement gains, citing the high dropout rates among students who enter the program. But such concerns weren't raised before commission members. Nor did they hear about nightmarish problems at KIPP schools, like the now-closed KIPP school in Fresno, Calif., where there were "numerous ... allegations of mistreating [KIPP] students," according to a December 2008 report by the Fresno Unified School District. Similar allegations of abuse surfaced in the KIPP school in Fulton County, Ga., in March 2009.

The commission didn't hear growing concerns that charter schools "segregate by race, family income, disabilities and English learner status" and are "substantially more segregated than public schools in the same district," as reported in a recently released study by the Education and Public Interest Center at Arizona State University and University of Colorado — findings that mirrored those of a UCLA study released a week earlier.

Instead, the commission heard from supporters of charter schools. Among the out-of-town "experts" Duggan selected to "educate" the commission was Whitney Tilson of New York City, a Wall Street investment manager and owner of a hedge-fund firm, who sits on the board of the KIPP charter school there. Tilson's presentation used much of the same public school bashing, skewed data trotted out by those who want to convert public schools to a private, for-profit enterprise.

There is money to be made in charter schools, and for-profit companies have found a way around the state law that grants charters from school boards to run a school with public money. A St. Petersburg Times report in January 2002 found that "For-profit corporations create nonprofit foundations to obtain the charters, then hire themselves to run the schools ... Developers team with the charter companies to offer homebuyers an upscale amenity: tuition-free, taxpayer-funded schools for their developments."

John Delaney, current president of the University of North Florida and Jacksonville mayor from 1995 to 2003, was one of the founders of the Nongroup, a secretive organization of movers and shakers who are prime contributors to political campaigns. (The group recently disbanded to form the Jacksonville Civic Council; more on this on page 3.) During his terms as mayor, Delaney was an outspoken proponent of mayoral control of Jacksonville schools, and continues to push for it today. Delaney served as chief of staff under

former mayor Ed Austin, who also sits on the commission.

Many Nongroup members had ties with the local construction and development industries, including former St. Joe CEO Peter Rummell, land-use lawyer M. Lynn Pappas and Preston Haskell, founder of the Haskell Company, the largest privately held construction firm in the state. Haskell has become a pioneer in charter school ventures. A new division of his company, Haskell Educational Services, opened in August 1998 in Pembroke Pines, Fla., what a business publication described as "the first city-run charter school in the country." Haskell's company not only designed and built the facility, but helped operate the 500-student elementary school. Two years later, the Haskell education division accounted for nearly 18 percent of the company's business, according to the Jacksonville Business Journal. Eventually, Haskell's education division turned the operation of its charter schools over to Charter Schools USA, while Haskell took responsibility for financing and development of charter schools.

More recently, Haskell began financing a program that grooms locals for political office. Twenty-eight well-connected folks were selected for the inaugural class of the Political Leadership Institute at Jacksonville University, a Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce project funded with Haskell seed money. Duval County Charter Review Commission Chairman Duggan is among the 28, as are two other Commission members. Jeanne Miller, whose legal background includes stints working for mega-developer Regency Centers Corp., is currently legal counsel at Florida State College at Jacksonville, which operates its own charter school — Pathways Academy, which opened at its downtown campus in August 2006. Commission member Billy Catlin, among the 28 future political leaders, has strong ties to the homebuilding and development industries, and he co-emceed the 13th annual Laurel Awards Ceremony in April 2007, hosted by Northeast Florida Builders Association to recognize the "best of the best" in the local homebuilding industry. Both Miller and Catlin cast votes to replace the elected Duval County School Board with another structure that will likely include charter schools.

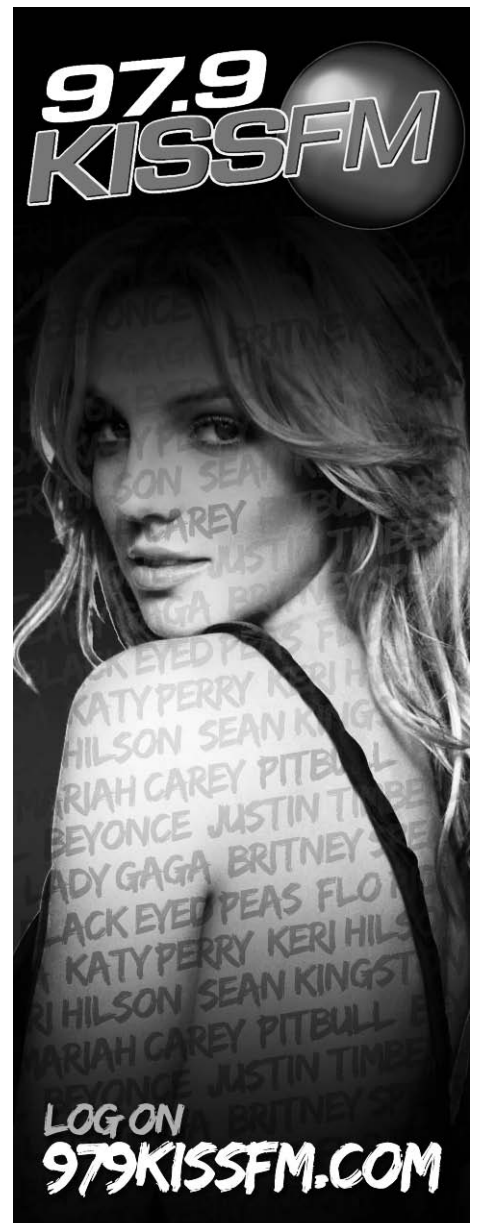
The City Council will ultimately decide whether to turn any of the commission's recommended options into a Charter amendment for voters to accept or reject. Expect a media tsunami of corporate-funded school-bashing designed to convince you that big business knows best — even when it comes to your children. □

*Billee Bussard is a retired journalist who writes about education issues. She is editor of SummerMatters.com.*

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