

# The Secret Group That Wants to Take Over Your School

By Sarah Lahm



**D**on't look now, but there's something creepy coming toward you, and it wants to take over your public school system. Sure, it's connected—through all-important grants—to many of the big names in today's education reform movement (Gates, Walton, Broad), but most people have probably never heard of it.

This “education reform powerhouse” is the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which goes by the acronym CRPE—or “creepy.” How fitting. While there are many individuals and organizations on the front lines of the free-market education reform movement—from Teach for America, to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, to the Recovery School District in New Orleans—

CRPE has not been publicly outed. Instead, it has steadily carved out an influential role for itself behind the scenes.

In fact, CRPE operates in a manner that is strikingly similar to ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council), the secretive, powerful group funded by the Koch brothers and a large roster of corporations. Here's a look at how the two organizations work:

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1. Member networks: Both CRPE and ALEC have a “secret club” component, through their member networks. With ALEC, the members are state legislators. With CRPE, they are school districts from across the United States (there are currently thirty-nine of them).
2. Network meetings: Both CRPE and ALEC host member network meetings or conferences, where a common philosophy (based on a distinct rightwing ideology) is honed, articulated, and shared.
3. Model legislation: Both CRPE and ALEC create sample, model policies (CRPE) or “cookie-cutter bills” (ALEC) for the districts or legislators who are part of their member networks.
4. Free-market funders: Like ALEC, CRPE is funded by very wealthy, free-market-focused special interests, including the Walton Foundation.

One difference is that ALEC has been around since the early 1970s while CRPE is a more recent concoction. University of Washington political science professor Paul T. Hill founded the group in 1993, just as the “accountability” movement in public education was taking off, and it is housed at the University of Washington-Bothell. CRPE is affiliated with the university, but Hill explains, “Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.” And, although CRPE describes itself as engaging in “independent research and policy analysis,” in 2011 the Center for Media and Democracy’s Source Watch website tagged the group as an “industry-funded research center that . . . receives funding from corporate and billionaire philanthropists as well as the U.S. Department of Education.”

While Hill may not be well known nationally, he is no shrinking violet when it comes to agenda-driven policy work. Beyond CRPE, he has been affiliated with the right-leaning Hoover Institute and its Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, which focuses on vouchers and other market-based, privatization-centered reforms for public schools.

And that right-leaning stamp is all over CRPE, which has built a network of “portfolio school districts” from New York City to New Orleans and beyond. It promises to run these districts like a stock portfolio. Under this

model, schools are to become more “autonomous,” and districts will be decentralized for a more “hands-off” approach. In an eighteen-month portfolio implementation guide that CRPE provides school districts, a suggested strategy for the first two months is to “announce the district will replace five schools with charter schools.” Schools will be closed for such failures as “negative labor-management relations.”

**M**any people in progressive-minded Minneapolis would be shocked to know that the Minneapolis public school system has been part of the CRPE network since 2010 (thanks to a makeover, led, for free, by consultants from the global consulting firm McKinsey and Company). Today, this shadowy organization is on the verge of completely overhauling the public school district’s entire operation.

Anyone needing proof should look no further than the 2013 CRPE meeting for Portfolio Network members that was held in Seattle. A video from that meeting lays bare the competitive, resource-scarce mindset behind CRPE, and it even uses the Minneapolis public schools—albeit superficially—as a test case for the presentation.

The video—available on YouTube as “Dollars and Sense Accountability”—offers attendees lots of suggestions for how schools can expand their limited pots of money. The assumption always seems to be that schools just need to do more with less, so the suggestions are pragmatic. They include encouraging schools to grow their enrollment (the presenter, Marguerite Roza, who now works for CRPE, recommends pushing schools on this, because they’ll always say they’re too full). CRPE also suggests paying teachers extra to teach more kids, and pitting schools against one another in a battle for resources. All of this is based around a central question: What does it look like when a district starts to view schools like businesses?

To begin, Roza praises Minneapolis for its “enormous cooperation,” because the district has offered its data for use as an example of how to view schools “in terms of cost and outcomes.” Roza then shows participants a graph, where Minneapolis school sites (unnamed) are splayed out according to how much money they spend in comparison to how “high performing” they are. Before

she delves in too deeply, however, Roza makes one point very clear: “I hope when you leave this session, you realize that the money part of the equation has to be part of the accountability bit, so you have to start connecting the spending and the outcomes together,” she says.

Throughout the video, it becomes clear that what Roza means is that the ideal school is one which spends less money but gets high test scores. It also becomes clear that, to Roza, and by extension CRPE, kids and schools are mere widgets in the *Hunger Games*-like landscape of school finance that CRPE promotes.

At one point, Roza points to the graph full of Minneapolis examples and says, “Look at the relationship between spending and outcomes! It’s pretty dismal, right?” Roza acknowledges that “schools are messy,” but then veers back to CRPE’s market-driven ideology: “If we’re trying to get to a system where we’re leveraging our money to get the best possible outcomes we could get, we need a more robust relationship between spending and outcomes than we have.”

In the video, Roza zeros in on the concept of “nice” schools, which fall into the high-spending, high-performing part of her graph, and she then makes a whole lot of creepy allegations about them. In her Minneapolis example, there is only one such school, which sits by itself up in the lonely far corner of the graph.

Roza seems to assume that this school is a high-spending hog, feeding off the trough, and getting great outcomes on every other school’s “dime.” If such a school exists in your district, Roza tells the hushed crowd, “You should figure out how much extra you’re spending for those kids,” because this is not a “replicable model.” It’s just too expensive, Roza concludes.

Her solution? Force such schools to “take more kids,” and don’t listen when they tell you they’re too full. In fact, when they do tell you they are too full, simply ask them, “All right, did you want to give up the jazz band or the golf team?” Because, it seems, they must be lying about their ability to “cram more kids in,” as Roza puts it, just so they can protect their elite, district-funded programs. (Roza seems not to understand that, in Minneapolis, there are wealthy neighborhoods, but there are no wealthy schools rolling in district dollars.)

It turns out that the school Roza was referring to is

Minneapolis’s Dowling Elementary, a K-5 site that indeed spends a lot of money. But it spends a lot because it serves an “unusually large percent of special needs kids,” according to Minneapolis’s former budget director Sarah Snapp, who was at the CRPE meeting. Snapp shared this information after Roza gave her fiscally conservative spiel.

Dowling Elementary is named after educator and legislator Michael Dowling, who, according to the school’s website, “succeeded in having the first bill passed providing state aid for handicapped children in 1919. Being handicapped himself, Mr. Dowling realized the importance of equal access to education for all people.” Even today, the school has a program for students with health-related disabilities. These students have their own special education classification, and Dowling was—and is—designed to meet their needs, alongside Dowling’s non-special-needs population.

At the CRPE meeting, Snapp tells Roza that Dowling does have a “unique set of factors” that make it look like a big spender, and also warns that lumping all students in a district together “might mask some of what’s going on.”

Still, Roza moves on in her presentation, and makes a joke about the next section, called “Performance Funding,” saying wryly, “This is where the school does well and we give them more money.”

Not quite. This would be a dangerous path to go down, Roza warns, because if you give a school “cash” for doing well (on standardized tests, of course), then that “high-performing” school will also become a “higher spending” school. Forget that, says Roza. Instead, she advises redefining “accountability” as, simply, the “right to continue to operate” according to a “continuous improvement model.”

Roza persists with her, and CRPE’s, definition of accountability, saying schools will—no, *must*—“seek to continuously go up,” with no “threshold” or end in sight, in terms of test-based measurements. The stakes are very high in this model. Roza explains that it is “constantly the lowest-performing, at a particular spending level, schools . . . that should go away or improve . . . and then you get a system that’s constantly striving for higher performance.”

The overall goal is to strip schools down from their messy, complicated “overspending” heights, and collapse them all into a pure “student-based” funding model.



(CRPE shares their love of funding students, not programs, with ALEC, which has a model “Student-Centered Funding” bill, essentially a school voucher program.) Then, says Roza, districts will have arrived at a cost and outcomes Nirvana, where they can “just manage on performance.”

This, she explains, will yield a “vertical line full of dots” on a graph.

**T**hat may be the ideal way to view schools, students, and teachers from a CRPE point of view. On the ground, in Minneapolis, community members would probably object if it were known that their schools are being guided by the CRPE’s rightwing ideology.

But this may be changing.

At an April 14 Minneapolis school board meeting, parents, teachers, and students from across the city came to express their frustration with the district and its latest plans.

First up, there was a contingent from Roosevelt High School, an old-time school in south Minneapolis that has 80 percent students of color and a high proportion of kids in poverty (76 percent). In March, Roosevelt parents and staff received their school’s budget for the upcoming school year; it was \$248,000 short of what they needed. The worst part? The budget cut—which was deceptively framed as an increase—came as Roosevelt stands to grow, by adding 100 new students to its incoming freshman class after years of being seen as one of Minneapolis’s “less desirable” schools.

It also came just as Minneapolis Public Schools Interim Superintendent Michael Goar was making very public claims about “right-sizing” the district’s budget, in order to send millions of dollars back into the pockets of the district’s schools.

This strategy—of “right-sizing,” with the promise that this will bring autonomy and funds straight to the schools—is CRPE all the way. Tellingly, a brief CRPE video about the virtues of school autonomy includes the insistence that schools must be given the “freedom” to control their money, as the ultimate goal, in the words of CRPE founder Paul Hill, is for a school to be “as free about what it does as a charter school.”

But the Roosevelt parents and students are not buying it. For the first time in years, under the energetic leadership of parent Jeanette Bower, the school has been getting organized—and vocal. School supporters went to the school board meeting to rally for Roosevelt, and to continue changing the school’s image from that of a “ghetto school,” in the words of ninth grade student Lewis Martin, to that of a school people choose to come to.

Their list of complaints about the lack of funding for Roosevelt were long, and will sound familiar to anyone who has been watching the move to defund and privatize America’s public schools:

Roosevelt is the only high school in Minneapolis with no theater program, and the district is not providing any funds to remedy this.

With budget cuts, the school will have to lay off its community liaisons, who have been going out into the community to change the narrative of “failure” (due to test scores) that hovers over the school.

The school will have to let its librarian go, and class sizes may increase.

Also, the district will only provide funding for the 100 new students who have signed up to attend Roosevelt next year in the fall, when the students actually show up. The problem with this, in the eyes of the Roosevelt community, is that the school can’t hire extra teachers because the hiring season is happening now, in the spring. (This is CRPE’s preferred way to fund schools: only according to the numbers of students who show up.)

For Roosevelt High School senior Shahmar Dennis, who also spoke out at the April 14 board meeting, the lack of clear information from the district around Roosevelt’s budget is troubling.

“We are a school on the rise, but our music program will suffer,” he says. “We have more students coming next year, but we can’t buy new instruments.”

Dennis explained that he is going off to college in the fall, but that he still deeply cares about his school: “I won’t be here next year but I want to see Roosevelt High School growing and doing well academically, with a good theater program.”

That desire is diametrically opposed to the CRPE agenda. ♦