



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh
Press Clips
Saturday, July 19, 2014

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[Number of Nonpublic Schools Participating in AAA Grows \(Alabama School Connection\)](#)

The number of students using options provided through the Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) aren't yet publicly available, but with the 2014-2015 school year opening in the next few weeks, here's an update on which nonpublic, a.k.a. private, schools have agreed to take students from "failing" public schools along with the scholarships from donations that were collected to pay for students' tuition per the AAA.

Keep in mind that only 52 students were reported to have transferred to nonpublic schools at the start of the 2013-2014 school year, while 667 students transferred to a "non-failing" school within the same district.

The most recent list of "failing" schools was released in mid-January of this year.

School officials had until January 31 to notify parents of the "failing" school designation.

Parents had until May 2 to notify the school of their intent to transfer.

The list of participating schools has grown from 29 to 93 to 136 in the time period from August 2013 to April 2014 to July 2, 2014. The map below shows locations of participating schools (indicated by the red marker) and locations of public schools deemed "failing" under the Alabama Accountability Act (indicated by the orange school icon).

What Did the Schools Agree to Do in Order to Participate?

There were hoops to jump through, certainly. Those hoops are outlined here. There are minimum requirements, such as being in existence for three years, a 180-day school year or its hourly equivalent, and being accredited by one of six agencies.

If previously-enrolled public school students were enrolled in a public school that was deemed to be "failing" under the AAA guidelines, and the student uses funds from a scholarship-granting organization (SGO) to attend the nonpublic school, the nonpublic participating school (referred to as a "qualifying nonpublic school" in the law) agrees to do the following for that particular student:

Annually administer either the state achievement tests or nationally recognized norm-referenced tests that measure learning gains in math and language arts to all participating students in grades that require testing under the accountability testing laws of the state for public schools (currently grades 3 through 8).

Allow the costs of the testing requirements to be covered by the educational scholarships distributed by the SGO.

Provide the parents of each student who was tested with a copy of the results of the tests on an annual basis beginning with the first year of testing.

Provide the test results to Alabama Department of Revenue (ADOR) on an annual basis, beginning with the first year of testing.

Provide graduation rates of those students benefiting from education scholarships to the ADOR or an organization chosen by the state in a manner consistent with nationally recognized standards. [Taken verbatim from this form required to be completed when seeking participation status.]

How Does the Tuition for the Nonpublic Qualifying School Get Paid?

Student's Family Income Level Below 150% of Median Alabama Income

If the student's family's income is below 150% of the median Alabama income (around \$62,000 for 2013), the student's tuition can be paid through a scholarship from a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO). Donations by individuals and corporations to the SGOs can reduce actual tax liability, meaning the income tax that the individual or corporation pays is reduced by the amount of the donation, with restrictions noted below.

For individuals, up to \$7,500 can be claimed as a tax credit, but the total amount cannot be more than 50% of the taxpayer's total liability.

For corporations, that total amount is not restricted, but is capped at 50% of the corporation's tax liability.

The total amount of tax credits claimed across the state cannot exceed \$25 million in a calendar year. ADOR has prescribed a method to allow taxpayers to reserve tax credits in order to keep track of the amounts. See "Reserving Tax Credits" on ADOR's Accountability Act page.

Student's Family Pays the Tuition Directly to a Nonpublic Qualifying School

For families that pay tuition directly to a nonpublic qualifying school, an amount equal to 80% of the state funding per student (approximately \$3500 for the 2013 calendar year) can be deducted from the family's actual income tax owed.

Scholarship-Granting Organizations (SGOs)- Updated List

Brendan Kirby of al.com wrote a great article in January 2014 explaining SGOs and their impact. Mike Cason, also of al.com, provided this update in March 2014.

There are currently nine SGOs that have been approved by the Alabama Department of Revenue (ADOR):

AAA Scholarship Foundation, Inc.

Chambers County Educational Foundation, Inc.

Alabama Opportunity Scholarship Fund

Beacons of Hope, Inc.

Scholarships for Kids, Inc.

Foundation for Educational Progress – The address given for this organization is for The Country Day School, but the Headmaster’s blog states they will utilize Scholarships for Kids, Inc. for scholarships.

Rocket City Scholarship Granting Organization, Inc.

Montessori Society of Huntsville

One Hundred Black Men of Greater Mobile, Inc.

There is much more information to be shared about SGOs: how they operate, how strict the student income eligibility requirement is, how money that has been donated is distributed, and what SGOs are allowed to do with excess donations beyond the amounts required for tuition payments for students previously enrolled in “failing” schools (excess funds can be distributed after September 15). That’s next.

The Irony of Having a Fully-Paid Education in a Nonpublic School Versus the Cost to Attend Public Schools

The irony of having a student’s full tuition and fees paid by an SGO versus the cost of the academic fees charged by public schools is not lost on me.

A student in a public school could rack up \$150 or more in fees for academic courses, while a student attending a nonpublic school on a scholarship from an SGO could end up with zero fees to pay out of pocket.

I wonder how long it will take for families to figure that out.

Summing It Up - The Bare Minimum You Need to Know

We do not yet know how many students transferred from “failing” public schools to nonpublic qualifying schools for the 2014-2015 school year.

A nonpublic schools must “qualify” in order to receive scholarships from SGOs for students from “failing” public schools.

The number of nonpublic qualifying schools has grown to 136 statewide.

The map shows the locations of both the nonpublic qualifying schools and the public schools deemed "failing" under the AAA.

Nonpublic qualifying schools have agreed to additional accountability measures in order to receive funds from SGOs for payment for student tuition.

Tuition is paid through SGOs for students whose families meet low-income requirements.

Families who can afford to pay tuition directly to the nonpublic qualifying school can be granted tax credits for that tuition.

Tax credits are available, up to a yearly cap of \$25 million, for those who donate to SGOs.

SGOs have additional rules and regulations that will be covered in a future post.

[Robert Shattuck, defeated early in GOP primary for 6th Congressional District, weighs write-in run \(AL.com\)](#)

Usually having no campaign money and coming in dead last in a Republican primary would encourage a defeated candidate to wait until the next election cycle.

And Alabama's "sore loser" law prevents a candidate from trying to run in the same year in another party or as an independent, according to the Alabama secretary of state's office. But a write-in candidacy is allowed.

And the write-in method is the next tactic of Republican Robert Shattuck of Mountain Brook, Ala. He has recently declared on his website that he is running again to be the next congressman from the 6th Congressional District, via write-in.

The Republican candidate came in last in a field of seven on June 3, getting 587 votes out of more than 75,000 cast. He had sought the Republican nomination for the Birmingham-area district after the retirement of U.S. Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Vestavia Hills.

Leading up to the June 3 primary, Shattuck had to try a variety of campaign tactics, given his lack of money. Shattuck's bare-bones budget drove him to the Internet, where communication is free. He runs a website for his campaign on the free blog site, Blogspot.

As he took to the Internet, he commandeered discussions of the primary by aggressive use of Twitter hashtags. And some annoyed people suggested he was "spamming" their email inboxes.

Spamming is the aggressive use of unsolicited bulk email sent to many users.

Shattuck even asked supporters to help him email people in the district.

Shattuck soon became somewhat famous to the Alabama media, especially after the June 3 primary, for continuing to weigh in on how Congress is broke, and how the remaining candidates, Gary Palmer and Paul DeMarco, would not be able to fix anything in Washington, D.C. (Palmer eventually won the July 15 GOP runoff in the largely GOP Birmingham-centered district.)

Matt Murphy, a radio talk-show host, was among many who grew weary of receiving emails from Shattuck. The emails had a multiplier effect, as people who responded to Shattuck -- usually to ask they be removed from email lists -- responded to everyone on Shattuck's long lists.

Shattuck spam

[View full size](#)

A piece of Internet artwork directed at Robert Shattuck via his Facebook page. Some complained Shattuck was "spamming" their email inboxes.

[Facebook](#)

"Keep 'em coming for me, Rob," Murphy wrote in exasperation on June 16. "They don't bother me at all. It also gives me a chance to annoy people a second time here, by hitting 'reply all.'"

But troubles for Shattuck began before he lost on June 3.

Shattuck's viewpoints often put him at odds with fellow Republicans. Before the June 3 primary, Shattuck responded to a question from AL.com about stimulating the economy. Shattuck suggested that the food stamp program could be expanded.

Near the end of the June 3 primary season, Yellowhammer News, a right-leaning website, declined to invite him to an interview session given to each of the other six candidates.

Shattuck didn't have much campaign money, either, something that he says is actually driving his campaign.

For one, Shattuck believes a top issue is the amount of money spent in congressional and presidential elections. He frequently cites the work of Professor Lawrence Lessig of Harvard University, who has started a political action committee to get people elected to Congress who will vote to restrict campaign finance laws.

Shattuck did not immediately respond to an email for comment on his write-in campaign.

[Airbus closes gap in orders war with Boeing, nabs deals worth \\$75 billion-plus at Farnborough \(AL.com\)](#)

Airbus still lags Boeing in year-to-date aircraft orders, but the 2014 Farnborough International Airshow where it secured commitments and firm orders for 496 aircraft worth more than \$75 billion helped the Toulouse, France-based planemaker close the gap considerably.

Airbus entered the global aerospace trade show and exposition near London Monday trailing its U.S. archrival in the orders race by 209 net planes with 290 orders to Boeing's 499 after deliveries and cancellations were considered.

By Thursday, however, Boeing's lead shrank to less than 150 orders after securing new deals for only 201 aircraft worth about \$40 billion during the show.

Current totals show Airbus with 648 orders to Boeing's 783.

John Leahy, Airbus' chief operating officer for customers, said in a prepared statement the company's performance in recent days signals long-term growth and stability.

"The orders and commitments we've received at this record-breaking Farnborough for both the A330neo and A320neo families are together an unequivocally resounding endorsement for these most cost-efficient aircraft," Leahy said.

"For both our single-aisle and widebody categories, the high representation of lessors – widely regarded as the global 'barometer' of the industry – is indicative of the long term confidence in the capacity needs for sustainable growth for the airlines in the years ahead," he said.

Specifically, the deals inked at Farnborough include purchase orders for 358 planes totaling \$38.4 billion at current list prices plus memoranda of understanding for another 138 aircraft valued at \$36.9 billion.

Airbus is currently building its first A320 assembly line on U.S. soil at Mobile Aeroplex, expected to figure prominently in the company's ability to efficiently fill the mounting backlog for the popular single-aisle aircraft. The \$600 million facility is slated to come online in 2015, deliver its first Mobile-assembled aircraft in April 2016 and employ about 1,000 people when it reaches full annual production of 40 to 50 aircraft by 2018.

Boeing, meanwhile, scored its biggest deal Wednesday with Qatar Airways for 50 of its long-haul passenger 777X aircraft and the option to double the order.

Boeing issued the following statement Thursday morning, "Customers demonstrated their strong confidence in the family of Boeing commercial products, announcing orders and commitments for 201 Boeing airplanes valued at more than \$40.2 billion at list prices."

Farnborough officials confirmed total orders and commitments from all participants through Wednesday night totaled 800 aircraft valued at \$113 billion, plus commitments for more than 1,300 engines worth an estimated \$26 billion.

Order highlights for Airbus are as follows:

Orders and commitments for 121 A330neos worth \$33.2 billion, including an order by AirAsia X for 50 A330-900neos valued \$13.8 billion.

Orders and commitments for a total 363 A320 family aircraft worth an estimated \$39 billion, including 317 A320neo and A321neo aircraft worth \$34.4 billion.

The milestone order came when SMBC Aviation Capital ordered 110 A320neo aircraft, pushing total sales for the fuel-efficient narrowbody models past 3,000.

[Does voting with a gun in Alabama merit a Bill of Rights award? A Tennessee group thinks so \(AL.com\)](#)

A Pelham man's efforts to vote with an openly displayed holstered pistol that some authorities say is a violation of Alabama law has earned him a nomination for an award by a Tennessee group that promotes the U.S. Constitution.

Robert Kennedy Jr. of Pelham has been nominated for the 14th Annual Bill of Rights Award by the Tennessee Committee for the Bill of Rights. The award will be presented at the group's banquet in December.

The committee's June Griffin of Dayton, Tenn., said in a phone interview today that Kennedy earned the nomination "in that there has to be some jeopardy or loss of money, time, bodily harm or threat of arrest" while exercising the Bill of Rights.

The award recognizes the "exercise of your God-given rights under jeopardy," Griffin said.

In Kennedy's case, he went to vote in Tuesday's primary runoff election wearing a holstered Smith & Wesson Sigma .380-caliber pistol to exercise his right to bear arms despite some authorities warning about a prohibition on firearms at polls.

Kennedy also tried to vote in the June 3 primary election with a holstered pistol in Pelham, but he was denied entry by law enforcement.

"I feel very, very honored," Kennedy said in an interview today. "I didn't do anything special. If defending your constitutionally protected rights is something special, it shouldn't be. It should be automatic."

Close to 10 Pelham police officers arrived at the voting site at the First Baptist Church of Pelham's annex building on Tuesday morning in response concerns about firearms displayed by Kennedy along with four or so members of the gun-rights group BamaCarry, all of whom carried holstered pistols.

A police officer asked the group to leave the area. No one was arrested.

"Nobody should have to go through what I went through, but that's just what happened with the government overreach. They step outside their constitutional boundaries," said Kennedy, who is a founding member of BamaCarry.

He credits the group's board members for their work and support of the issue including Eddie Fulmer, Billy Denton, Dennis Stacy and Jason Tulley. He also noted "all the support we have received from all the BamaCarry vested and Facebook members."

"I think Eddie Fulmer would have been a more deserving person, or any BamaCarry board member," Kennedy said, referring to the group's president who lives in Tuscaloosa County. "Eddie Fulmer is the face of BamaCarry. We wouldn't be this successful without him."

In a statement about his nomination, the Tennessee group said: "Mr. Kennedy, in his act of voting while armed, is certainly a candidate in these unusual times when such an act would formerly be considered a normality. Under fairer circumstances, this normal deed would have gained little attention, but in the direct assault on the Bill of Rights, his normal act now merits recognition of the highest order."

Oil and gas regulators want to hear from the public before leases are sold in the Gulf of Mexico (AL.com)

The federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is seeking comments from the public on proposals to sell leases for oil and gas exploration in the Gulf of Mexico.

BOEM Graphic.png

Federal oil and gas regulators are seeking comments from the public regarding leases to be sold in the Gulf of Mexico. (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management)

The agency held a number of "scoping meetings" in cities along the Gulf Coast; from Panama City, Fla. to Larose, La. The leases to be sold are in the agency's central planning region, an area that stretches from the Alabama to the Texas-Louisiana border.

Each lease that's sold is a 3-mile by 3-mile block. There are currently 7,544 blocks that will be offered up for lease.

BOEM regulates the development of mineral resources offshore. The meetings are required for a supplement to an environmental impact statement, a study under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The comment period will close on July 21. In the meantime, comments are being accepted at cpa241-epa226@boem.gov. Comments may also be mailed to:

Gary Goeke

Environmental Assessment Section

Office of Environment (GM 623E)

Bureau of Ocean Energy Management

Gulf of Mexico OCS Region

1201 Elmoor Park Boulevard

New Orleans, LA 70123-2394

[Alabama to review sexual education policy after sodomy ban ruled unconstitutional \(AL.com\)](#)

Alabama officials are reconsidering state requirements saying public school sex education should emphasize that gay sex is illegal after the state's consensual anal and oral sex ban was ruled unconstitutional last month.

Passed in 1992, the sex education law provides the foundation for the Alabama Department of Education's health curriculum, one that critics allege is destructive to gay students. It states that homosexuality is "not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state."

An Alabama appeals court overturned the state's sodomy ban in June. Aimed at criminalizing homosexual sex, the law was used to convict a Dallas County man for sexual misconduct, although the jury found the homosexual encounter was consensual.

Due to the court's ruling, Michael Sibley, an Alabama Department of Education spokesman, told AL.com this week that the language in the state requirement is "is legally wrong and no longer operative," and that "'homosexual conduct' is not illegal in Alabama."

"All that being said, the statement that 'homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public' is not a legal conclusion, but rather a policy statement," Sibley wrote in an email, adding that it hadn't been affected by the appellate court's decision.

Monica Rodriguez, president of New York-based Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, said the law discriminates against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. She urged lawmakers to amend it.

"It's one of those forms of institutional oppression that's bigger than one line in the sex policy," said Rodriguez, whose group advocates for comprehensive sexual education reform. "It can be a pervasive attitude that influences school climate. It not only impacts health, but it impacts their academic achievement.

Susan Watson, the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama, called the state's sodomy ban a "relic from the past," and "unconstitutional and unenforceable." She said she was unaware of any legal challenges to the reference to the sodomy ban in the sexual education requirements.

"If there are school districts promoting this teaching or if there is someone who is adversely affected — student or teacher — we want to know about it and would like to speak with them," Watson said.

What's taught in Alabama?

AL.com asked several school districts how they approached sex education. Many said they adhered to state's required health curriculum, which focuses on abstinence.

Jefferson County Schools: "Homosexuality is not a topic addressed in our curriculum," said Shannon Stanley, deputy superintendent of teaching and learning. "We follow the abstinence-based approach as set forth by the State Department of Education and do not address sexual conduct of any nature."

Fairfield city schools: Superintendent Walter Gonsoulin Jr. said "we do not promote or teach intolerance as part of our curriculum." The school system does not teach the use of condoms.

Hoover schools: Assistant superintendent Ron Dodson said he doesn't believe that any classes specifically address the issue of whether homosexuality is acceptable or homosexual conduct is a crime.

"I don't think that that is something that we have explicitly taught," he said. "Any reasonable person is not going to go there" unless there's a specific reason to address it with an individual student or group of students, Dodson said.

He said Hoover schools would wait for guidance from the state Department of Education before making any changes to sex education curriculum.

Madison County schools: Spokeswoman Geraldine Tibbs said follows the Alabama Department of Education's course of study for health and science. "No specific courses are taught related to sex education," she said.

Baldwin County Public Schools: Science supervisor Peggy Duck called abstinence "the full safe way to go." She couldn't say whether students are taught that homosexual conduct is illegal.

"This is not for the childrens' eyes, this is for the teachers' eyes," Duck said referring to the state statute. "This is not something the kids get."

Senate committee passes bill that includes big bucks for Alabama-built Navy ships (Yellowhammer News)

.S. Sen. Richard Shelby (R-Ala.), Vice Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, today announced full committee passage of the Fiscal Year 2015 Department of Defense Appropriations bill, which contains funding for ships being built by Austal USA at its Alabama manufacturing facility.

The bill will now go to the full Senate for consideration.

"The Department of Defense Appropriations bill funds defense-related programs that play a vital role in providing our nation's military with the resources that they need to strengthen our national security," said Shelby. "I am pleased that this bill includes funding to enhance Alabama's national defense capabilities and continue our state's commitment to serving our armed forces."

The bill fully funds three Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), with an additional \$80 million over and above the President's budget request for advanced funding for a fourth ship.

"LCS is extremely important to our Navy's ability to maneuver in shallow waters and to combat the threats of surface craft, submarines, and mines," said Shelby. "In addition to the three LCS provided in the President's budget, the \$80 million in additional funding allows for long-lead procurement in order to maintain shipyard capacity and cost savings. Adequate funding for LCS capabilities is essential to ensuring that our naval fleet is the best in the world and that our armed forces receive the equipment they need in order to execute future operations."

The bill also appropriates \$200 million above the president's budget request for an eleventh Joint High Speed Vessel (JHSV). Both the Independence-class LCS and JHSV are built at Austal USA in the port of Mobile.

"JHSV is an incredibly flexible vessel that can rapidly and simultaneously transport troops, equipment, and supplies," said Shelby. "The funding approved by the Committee today provides an additional JHSV, which will support efforts to decrease land-based choke points and maintain unit integrity."

Sen. Jeff Sessions added that he believes the appropriation is "a strong affirmation of the program in a time of tight budgets."

"I am very pleased with the work of Senator Shelby and the Senate Appropriations Committee in providing funding for the Littoral Combat Ship," he said. "This is a great ship and a key part of the Navy's future. I have advocated for it for many years. We must keep it on-track."

The Austal plant is located in Alabama's 1st Congressional District, which is represented by Republican Rep. Bradley Byrne. On Thursday, Byrne applauded the actions of the Senate Appropriations committee and his Alabama colleagues Sen. Shelby.

"Today's action in the Senate represents one more step in the appropriations process, and a positive development for the LCS program. I appreciate Senator Shelby and the Senate Appropriations Committee for recognizing the value the LCS adds to our Navy's capabilities.

Byrne previously worked to include language in the National Defense Authorization Act, which passed the House in May, that authorizes construction of four Littoral Combat Ships. The House Defense Appropriations Act only appropriated funding for two ships. The House and Senate will work out the differences in a joint Conference Committee later this year."

A final Defense Appropriations Act, along with the other eleven appropriation bills, must be passed by the end of the current fiscal year on September 30.

Austal USA currently employs over 4,000 Alabamians. For more on Austal's Alabama operation, check out Yellowhammer's Exchange interview with Austal USA President Craig Perciavalle.

[Wells Fargo to eliminate 468 mortgage banking jobs in Homewood \(AL.com\)](#)

Wells Fargo will lay off 468 employees from its home mortgage division's Homewood office, citing a decline in demand for payment assistance from homeowners whose properties faced the possibility of foreclosure.

The cuts represent 39 percent of the 1,192 jobs in the bank's Wildwood Parkway offices, which Wells Fargo spokesman Jay Lawrence said will not be shuttered.

"Our Wildwood facility will remain open and 724 Wells Fargo team members working for a variety of business units will continue working there," Lawrence said. "Birmingham is very important to us."

The bank will have a total of about 1,400 employees in metro Birmingham after the layoffs, he said. None of those whose jobs are being eliminated originated new loans.

Homewood Mayor Scott McBrayer said the layoffs are a "huge deal" for the families involved. "I hate it," McBrayer said. But the worst of the resulting direct economic impact is likely to be limited to the neighborhood surrounding the offices. Overall, he said, the community has enjoyed a more robust recovery than many others, and the layoffs aren't likely to significantly effect the city's tax base.

The effected employees were given 60 days' notice and, depending on length of service, may qualify for additional severance pay. All will receive job counseling and other support, the company said. An effort also will be made to move as many as possible to other jobs within the company, Lawrence said.

"Wells Fargo is committed to retaining as many of these valued team members as we can and, where possible, we will work to identify other opportunities for them within Wells Fargo," he said. "...We currently have a number of openings in our community bank in the Birmingham area."

The Homewood layoffs represent most of the 481 mortgage jobs Wells Fargo is eliminating nationwide. The employees were notified of the layoffs today. The Homewood office is at 210 Wildwood Parkway.

Today's announcement follows by about a year a similar reduction in employment in the mortgage division. In August of last year the company announced it was eliminating 365 jobs in the Homewood office.

Nationally, in a little over a year the bank has eliminated about 1,800 jobs from its mortgage divisions.

Nonprofits can remain quiet about supporters (Decatur Daily)

A California-based education reform group has given more than \$100,000 to political candidates in Alabama this election cycle.

But because of state statute on nonprofits and campaign finance reporting, finding out where StudentsFirst gets its money isn't possible. State law said corporations, including nonprofits, don't have to file campaign finance disclosure forms, according to the secretary of state's office.

Dr. Paul Bishop 300x250 Furniture Plan 39k ImprDecatur Public Library 300x250 95k Impr StudentsFirst was founded in 2010 by Michelle Rhee, the former Washington, D.C., schools leader. It has been a proponent of the Alabama Accountability Act, which allows tax credits for families who transfer students from the worst public schools to private ones.

Larry Lee, an education advocate in Alabama, said Thursday he wants to know more about the group and its financial backers.

"How are they giving away all this money, and where is it coming from?" Lee said.

He said if he wants to know where the Business Council of Alabama and the Alabama Education Association are getting their money, he can easily check the campaign finance records the groups' Political Action Committees are required to file.

"With StudentsFirst, you can't do that," Lee said.

The organization is playing by the rules, said Adam Thompson, deputy chief of staff for the secretary of state.

"(Nonprofits) are not considered a PAC if they are making direct donations," Thompson said. "They're basically treated like an individual, and individuals don't have to report who they give to or where they get the money."

The contributions do show up on candidates' finance reports.

StudentsFirst is a 501(c)4, which under federal guidelines means it can engage in political activity and endorse and oppose candidates. It has filed reports with the Federal Election Commission, but the last one was more than a year ago.

"Our policy is that we don't disclose the information of any one member, but we've received significant support from Democrats and Republicans, and from individuals and organizations from all walks of life," StudentsFirst spokesman Ross McMullin said Thursday. "Our average grassroots donation is around \$100.

"Alabama campaign finance law permits us to make candidate contributions directly from our C4, StudentsFirst. As a result, there is no need for us to establish a PAC in Alabama."

In several other states, StudentsFirst operates traditional PACs, according to media reports.

In 2011, The Sacramento Bee reported Rhee said she wanted to develop a national advocacy presence that could counter the influence of teachers unions at the local and state levels. At that time, StudentsFirst was active in Nevada, Florida, Indiana, Tennessee and Michigan, where it has pushed for bills that eliminate the "last in, first out" layoff policy common in public schools.

State Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, has carried similar legislation in Alabama. The bill died this year, but Henry said it will be back next year. He doesn't believe teachers who have been around the longest are necessarily the best and that other factors should be considered during reductions in force.

In May, StudentsFirst gave Henry \$15,000.

About where StudentsFirst gets its money, Henry said he's for full disclosure and possible changes to state rules.

"I would like to know before I take a contribution who is actually behind it," Henry said.

He'd also like groups, including the Alabama Education Association, to have to divulge all political spending, not just what they give a candidate. The AEA opposed Henry's legislation; it also spent money on behalf of his June GOP primary opponent. Henry won the election.

He estimates the AEA spent \$200,000 on mailers and other advertising against him, but he can't prove it.

"This election cycle has proven we did a lot to reform the way money moves around in elections, but it also allowed us to see a lot of loopholes we need to work on to have true transparent campaign finance," Henry said.

Charlotte Meadows, a former president of the Montgomery County School Board, was in 2013 named StudentsFirst's Alabama outreach director.

Last fall, StudentsFirst gave Meadows \$20,000 for her special election bid to win a State House seat. She lost.

StudentsFirst tried to give Gov. Robert Bentley \$5,000 last fall; he returned it.

"Gov. Bentley has strong feelings about what can and should be done to improve the quality of education in Alabama," campaign spokeswoman Rebekah Mason said. "He strongly supports local control and flexibility ... By accepting the StudentsFirst check, one could possibly interpret that he is not in support of local schools having that flexibility. We felt like there are some people who could possibly misinterpret that contribution, and we want to be clear where the governor stands."

Earlier this year, some Republican leaders complained about a PAC called Stop Common Core, run by former Republican state Sen. John Rice, which gave money to several GOP challengers to incumbents in the June primary.

Stop Common Core received money from the Alabama Foundation for Limited Government, a nonprofit created by Rice. Rice refused to name his donors. He was accused of violating state rules by running political ads designed to influence the outcome of an election.

Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard, R-Anniston, in May said Rice's group was working with the AEA on a "shell game" that violates the intent of the state's ban on PAC-to-PAC transfers.

This week, Hubbard said there is no comparison between StudentsFirst's backing and Rice's groups.

"StudentsFirst is a nationally recognized leader in finding innovative ways to improve public education for all students," he said in an emailed statement. "John Rice's Foundation for Limited Government is a shady, fly-by-night, cloak-and-dagger group created exclusively for the purpose of hiding AEA's campaign contributions. Comparing StudentsFirst to John Rice's group is like comparing Mother Teresa to the mafia."

Hubbard received \$5,000 from StudentsFirst in April. In February 2013, Hubbard's Storming the State House PAC reported \$2,500 from a StudentsFirst group in Indiana.

Attempts to reach Rice on Thursday were unsuccessful.