

## Being Smart about ALEC

By Carol Masters



A “Wall Street” street sign is superimposed on the image for the Commerce, Insurance, and Economic Development link on ALEC’s web site.

What Is ALEC? The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC.org) comprises not only legislators but “members of the private sector who share ALEC’s mission.” Its mission? “To advance the Jeffersonian principles of free markets, limited government, federalism, and individual liberty.”

What’s wrong with that? There may be clues in ALEC’s self-descriptions, its constituencies, and the ways the organization works.

ALEC’s function is to write, or rewrite, legislation and facilitate passing certain “model bills” that have far-reaching effects on many aspects of people’s lives and have, as well, many benefits to certain corporations’ bottom lines. Corporate executives appear to be the driving force in ALEC’s shaping of public policy. Behind closed doors, corporate representatives give state legislators changes they desire to laws and members “vote” on changes to be brought to state legislatures. That’s why similar bills are introduced into the legislature of all 50 states.

A list of the policy areas in ALEC’s sights shows how comprehensive the policy interests are: Nine task forces serve as the “laboratories” where public policies are developed and shaped. Each task force has a chair from the public and the private sector, and corporations are well represented on every committee. The task forces are:

- Civil Justice
- Health and Human Services
- Commerce, Insurance, and Economic Development (A street sign, “WALL ST” is superimposed on the image for this link.)
- Education; Energy, Environment, and Agriculture

- Telecommunications and Information Technology
- Tax and Fiscal Policy
- the oddly conjoined Public Safety and Elections (the background on this link is a yellow CRIME SCENE barrier tape)
- International Relations. With uncommon candor and/or arrogance, the organization states that the members of the International Relations Task Force assert “the power of free markets and limited government to propel economic growth not just in the United States but around the globe.



The People’s Plaza, Minneapolis

Empowered people renamed the Hennepin County Government Center Plaza the “People’s Plaza,” as movements sprang up from Wall Street in New York to San Francisco and from Minneapolis to Dallas.

Photo: Twin Cities Daily Planet/Ibrahim Hirsi

Who Are These People? ALEC says that it’s nonpartisan. You can judge that for yourself. Alumni include John Boehner, Eric Cantor, Congressman Joe Wilson (the infamous shouter who called the President a “liar” during the State of the Union address), former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, former House Speaker Tom DeLay, Andrew Card, Donald Rumsfeld (1985 chair of ALEC’s Business Policy Board), Governor Scott Walker, and more ([www.alecexposed.org](http://www.alecexposed.org)).

Corporate-Funded Corporations fund almost all of ALEC's operations. The Center for Media and Democracy reports that 98 percent of ALEC's funding comes from companies like Exxon Mobil, corporate “foundations” like the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation, or trade associations like the pharmaceutical industry’s PhRMA. Legislators pay dues, which, however, account for less than 2 percent of the

operating expenses. The funds subsidize legislators' trips to ALEC meetings, where they are wined, dined, and handed the model legislation to make law in their state.

Koch Industries (pronounced "coke") is one of the largest privately owned companies in the United States and owns companies involved in refining; pollution control equipment and technologies; minerals; fertilizers; polymers and fibers; commodity trading and services; forest and consumer products; and ranching. Co-owners Charles Koch and David Koch, through their representation on ALEC's governing boards, have considerable influence over ALEC bills and thus shape legislation, particularly in environmental matters and education, that touches every state.

According to Lisa Graves, in *The Nation*, August 1-8, 2011, "the Kochs have a penchant for paying their way out of serious violations and coming out ahead." A Texas ALEC model bill, now law, gives corporations immunity from penalties if they tell regulators about their environmental violations. There are dozens of such ALEC bills that limit environmental regulations in ways that would benefit Koch.



The cover of the Madison-based newspaper *The Wisconsinite*, 2004: evidence that ALEC has haunted the state for some time. Current governor, Scott Walker, then a legislator, is depicted on the right.

Profits are as much behind ALEC's agenda as ideology, *Nation* reporter John Nichols told *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross. "[ALEC's] goal is the advancement of an agenda that seems to be dictated at almost every turn by multinational corporations. ... ALEC is very, very active in [the] opening up of areas via privatization for corporations to make more money, particularly in places you might not usually expect, like public education."\*

Education Parents United for Public Schools ([www.parentsunited.org](http://www.parentsunited.org)) provides an exhaustive list of ALEC-sponsored bills that have undermined K-12 public education, including:

- Promoting voucher programs that drain public schools of resources
- Creating a scheme to deem public schools “educationally bankrupt” to rationalize giving taxpayer dollars to almost completely unregulated private schools, rather than addressing any problems
- Certifying individuals with no education background as teachers—a move that would weaken the quality of education. This policy is one inroad for military personnel to teach in public schools, even in primary grades
- Eliminating tenure for teachers in favor of “performance,” allowing districts to fire professionally trained older teachers in favor of lower-cost young people who may begin teaching without professional training
- Undermining teacher's unions

ALEC in Minnesota All three Minnesota education chairs—Rep. Pat Garofalo, Farmington; Rep. Sondra Erickson, Princeton; and Sen. Gen Olson, Minnetrista, are members of the ALEC Education Task Force. And currently there are many more Minnesota legislators in both the House and Senate who belong to ALEC.

\*Quoted in Beth Hawkins, “Parents United collection catalogs influence of secretive ALEC.” MinnPost, August 8, 2011.

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