

A Reading Program's Powerful Patron

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When Congress decided to appropriate \$2 million in fall 2001 to help D.C. kindergartners and first-graders learn to read, city school officials were told that the money could be spent only on the Voyager Expanded Learning literacy program, a new product with virtually no track record. They had just picked a different reading curriculum, and "we didn't want to be guinea pigs," recalled Mary Gill, then the system's chief academic officer.

School leaders did not know that the \$2 million was an earmark that had been guided into law by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) just after she had received more than \$30,000 in campaign contributions at a fundraiser held by Voyager's founder and chairman.

Landrieu's earmark illustrates the unusual role that Congress has played in shaping the District's troubled school system. No other school budget is subject to approval by Capitol Hill. None is so susceptible to the whims and policy prescriptions of federal lawmakers. And the parents, teachers and administrators of D.C. schools are the only ones in the country who lack a voting representative in Congress.

The Voyager story also highlights the haphazard way that curricula end up in the District's classrooms. For many years, educators have said that the patchwork of instructional material is one reason the city's students hover near the bottom of rankings in national test scores.

Landrieu, as the ranking Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate's D.C. appropriations subcommittee until early this year, was a pivotal figure in school spending and policy issues. With the Voyager earmark, she intruded on a curriculum decision normally made by teachers, principals, administrators and educational advisers.

"It is unclear to me why Congress thinks they're qualified to do that," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a nonprofit group based in the District. He said he thought the earmark was "a bad idea" because it added to the "overall fractured nature of the system."

D.C. schools have long been subjected to experimental curricula, piling "one program on top of another for so many years that one cannot tell what the system is trying to do academically or why," said a report commissioned by Casserly's group four years ago.

Landrieu declined requests for an interview, but in a statement to The Washington Post this month, she said she has "long championed new approaches to improving children's education, leading the push for smarter public-private partnerships and for innovative programs like Voyager."

Landrieu has received about \$80,000 from Voyager employees and lobbyists, Federal Election Commission records show. "It is not uncommon for Members of Congress to receive contributions from individuals who support their policy goals," she said in the statement to The Post, echoing a similar response she gave Education Week last year for a story on Voyager's political connections.

Voyager employed lobbyists and made political contacts to obtain at least 14 earmarks over five years, worth more than \$8 million, according to a review of congressional records. Some went to other parts of the country, but most -- \$5.23 million -- went to D.C. schools.

Randy Best, a founder of Voyager who has close ties to the Bush administration, said that "no fundraiser was ever tied to any legislation" of Landrieu's.

The political networking, he said, "gives you access to tell your story," he said. "I think we had a compelling story."

D.C. administrators and teachers said in recent interviews that they found the Voyager program useful, even successful for certain students. But in 2005, when the District did a survey of educators to select a new systemwide reading program, Voyager did not rank among the top three. It remains in use at two dozen schools for summer programs and pupils reading below grade level.

Some school officials who did not know that Voyager came to their classrooms as part of an earmark expressed frustration with the congressional interference.

"What other school district in the country has to go through the labyrinth of red tape this school district goes through here?" asked Charles H. Harden Jr., principal of Park View Elementary School, one of the schools that used the Voyager program. Landrieu and Congress "shouldn't be dictating what we do here," he said.

Purse Strings

Landrieu was one in a long line of congressional overseers of the District. Congress retains the right to approve the city's budget because it was the only way in 1973 that a powerful member of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. William Natcher (D-Ky.), would agree to grant the District home rule.

Two of the most sweeping D.C. education initiatives by Congress -- authorizing charter schools and approving taxpayer-supported vouchers for private and religious schools -- were imposed over the objections of school officials. Those

programs provided families with alternatives but did not directly address the larger problems in the public system. More than a quarter of D.C. students have gone to charters, and administrators say that many of those left behind are the most difficult to educate.

Some D.C. officials said they were dismayed when Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) reversed her opposition to vouchers and switched sides in 2000 to allow the program to be implemented, although she did not support vouchers in San Francisco, where she had been mayor. Feinstein said she backed the plan for D.C. schools because Mayor Anthony A. Williams had supported it.

"Local leaders should have the opportunity to experiment with programs that they believe are right for their area," she said at the time.

Landrieu, a major backer of charter schools in the District, sponsored a provision requiring the city to offer any surplus school property to public charter schools for at least 25 percent less than its appraised value before selling it to anyone else. D.C. school officials objected, saying that she had not consulted with local authorities first.

Voyager's Campaign

Best, a Texas merchant banker and entrepreneur, began leveraging political connections almost as soon as he launched Voyager in Dallas in 1994. He hoped to tap into what he thought would be a burgeoning business as pressure built for universal testing and higher standards for public schools.

"I decided the world needed one more reading program -- one that worked," Best said.

When George W. Bush ran for governor of Texas in 1998, Best and his fellow Voyager investors contributed more than \$45,000 to his campaign, and they gave more than \$20,000 to his running mate. As Voyager grew, it hired several state education officials, including the Texas education commissioner under Bush. When Bush ran for president, Best signed up to join the Pioneers, an elite group of "bundlers" who pledged to bring in \$100,000 for Bush. Best said he raised only about \$10,000.

As president, Bush appointed former Houston schools superintendent Roderick Paige to be secretary of education, and Paige launched Reading First, a \$1 billion-a-year reading program. To develop it, the Department of Education turned to some of the same researchers Best had hired to create Voyager's program.

By that time, Best had hired a Washington lobbyist and was looking for a way to get pilot programs in some schools without going through the process of selling curricula district by district. He signed up with the firm of former U.S.

representative Bob Livingston, a Louisiana Republican and former chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. Livingston began seeking "federal funding support for Voyager educational programs," according to his lobbying disclosure form.

"I'd never heard what an earmark was before," Best said.

Earmarks for curricula are rare, said Keith Ashdown, who tracks such appropriations at the nonpartisan Taxpayers for Common Sense, a budget watchdog group. Federal law prohibits the Department of Education from dictating curricula, requiring such decisions to be made locally. No such law restricts Congress.

On Sept. 24, 2001, the House Appropriations Committee included \$1 million for Voyager in the District's spending bill. A clause required the city to match it with another \$1 million. But Livingston did not produce a similar earmark out of the Senate, Best said. So Voyager hired another lobbying firm, O'Connor & Hannon, which arranged a meeting for Best with Landrieu, the ranking Democrat on the D.C. appropriations subcommittee.

Landrieu was "supportive of the idea" of federally funded pilot programs for Voyager, Best said. "The data we had was persuasive."

The Fundraiser

Shortly after the meeting in Landrieu's office, Best said he was called by someone in her office to ask whether he would throw a campaign fundraiser. On Oct. 19, 2001, at Best's residence in the Claridge, a high-rise condominium complex overlooking the Dallas skyline, Landrieu gave a short talk on the importance of reading, Best said.

The campaign contributions from Voyager employees and their relatives were enough to put the company on Landrieu's all-time Top 20 list of donors for people affiliated with an organization or company, a review of federal election records showed. Voyager employees, families and political action committees have given more to Landrieu than companies such as BellSouth and Tenet Healthcare.

The donors included Randy Best and his wife, Nancy, in addition to at least six other Voyager executives and Voyager's Senate lobbyist, Roy C. Coffee Jr., who said he remembered making a \$500 donation but declined to discuss it. Most had never before given to a Democrat running for Congress.

Most of the donors declined to discuss the donations or the fundraiser. Jeri Nowakowski, the Voyager executive vice president for product development who led the team that developed the company's reading programs, and her husband donated \$4,000. Nowakowski said Landrieu was one of the few Democrats to

whom she had given campaign money because "I've just known that she has been a supporter of education."

Campaign finance records indicate that Landrieu received contributions of about \$30,000 on or about Nov. 2. Four days later, she went to the Senate floor and offered an amendment to the House bill with the \$1 million Voyager earmark. Landrieu jettisoned the matching money requirement and doubled the federal portion to \$2 million.

"I am concerned about the current financial and management challenges of the schools and hope to work with the city on this front more specifically," Landrieu said in a speech to her fellow lawmakers. "We have to think outside of the box, in a new way."

"Sometimes," she said, "I think our District has been treated as a national guinea pig instead of the nation's capital."

A month later, on Dec. 7, the Senate passed the \$7.1 billion D.C. appropriations bill, including the \$2 million Voyager earmark. Less than two weeks later, Voyager got another boost from Landrieu in the spending bill for the Labor and Education departments: \$700,000 for the program to be tried in Louisiana. The following year, the District got another \$2 million earmark, \$575,000 went to Ohio and \$250,000 went to Pittsburgh.

'Found Money'

Voyager "wasn't something the school system solicited," said Gill, the retired D.C. schools academic administrator.

When picking a reading program, the District typically convenes principals, teachers and academic experts to decide which product fits best, said Elizabeth Primas, director of literacy for the system.

The selection of the core reading program is done every five years. For struggling students, the District also adopts an intensive "intervention" curriculum that often mirrors the core program.

Since the Voyager grant was only enough for a pilot program, it interfered with school administrators' desire to have a uniform intervention curriculum so that transient students didn't have to learn a new system each time they switched schools.

Although school officials might have wanted more control over the federal earmark, that is not how the congressional process works, said Gregory McCarthy, who at the time was deputy chief of staff for Mayor Williams.

"You definitely want to protect home rule and not undermine local authority," McCarthy said. However, when other jurisdictions received such grants, "other superintendents would say, 'It is found money, and you ought to find a way to work with it.' We always looked at it as money for children, and it was something that wouldn't otherwise be done."

Gill said she took the Voyager program and made the best of it. She was pleased that Voyager wanted to do rigorous testing to track student progress. She targeted schools in the poorest neighborhoods and hired additional employees. In the end, she said, Voyager was fine for some students, mainly because it included intensive training for teachers.

"I was really a nonbeliever," Gill said, until "I saw children who I knew were not reading . . . come in and listen and read."

Linda Butler, who at the time of the earmark was a reading coordinator and is now in charge of the District's federal reading grants, said that she didn't know where the Voyager money came from but that she was elated to get it. It helped pay for "campus coaches" who worked with teachers.

"I wondered how it landed here," Butler said. "If it was given to help our children, wonderful! Where can we get more grants from Congress?"

Mixed Reviews

Voyager officials said that a review of test results "strongly suggests" that their program had a "significant impact" on schools using it through 2005.

Last spring, the Department of Education offered a mixed review of Voyager. The department's "What Works" Web site, which rates curricula, says that Voyager's reading system has "potentially positive results" for learning phonics and letter recognition but "potentially negative effects" in reading comprehension.

Teachers at Park View are also divided. Monica Chase, a teacher there for 13 years, said she has used Voyager and a program offered by Houghton Mifflin. She said she prefers Houghton Mifflin because it publishes complementary materials for other subjects, such as math.

"I think they learn more with Houghton Mifflin, because it is cross-curriculum," Chase said. "They understand their homework better."

A 2002 study in Washington and Cleveland sponsored by the Council of the Great City Schools compared kindergarten students' reading skills in four public schools using Voyager with those at four schools not using Voyager. The study concluded that "a significant difference was found in favor of the Voyager classrooms."

Casserly, of the council, said that the study was interesting but limited in scope and that it needed "considerably greater investigation." There were issues about the size of the sample, the use of schools that did not make for ideal comparisons and the reliance on Voyager for some of the data.

"The results did not apply to a large number of cities, schools or students," Casserly said. "We didn't make much of it."

Voyager issued news releases to promote the results. The company's senior vice president, Jim Nelson, sent a handwritten note to Margaret Spellings, then the White House education adviser and now the secretary of the Department of Education. Nelson had known Spellings in Texas, where both worked for Bush when he was governor. "The results are pretty amazing," Nelson told Spellings. "It proves the research is true -- they can learn to read."

D.C. school officials selected Voyager for 24 schools in 2003 when they applied for federal grants through the Reading First program.

Voyager spokeswoman Shannon Overbeck said the company's subsequent review showed that students using the program improved their results on No Child Left Behind testing.

"We are very confident about the performance of [Voyager] in D.C. schools where it was implemented correctly," Overbeck said.

On Feb. 1, 2005, Best sold Voyager to ProQuest, an educational publisher, for \$380 million -- a 12-fold return on his initial investment.

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.