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- [Sun News](#)
- [Sun Accent](#)
- [Sun Business](#)
- [Sun Sports](#)
- [Sun Columnists](#)
- [Face to Face](#)

POLITICS

- [News and analysis blogged by the Sun's reporting team](#)

OPINION

- [Today's Opinion](#)
- [Sun Editorials](#)
- [Sun Columnists](#)
- [Flashpoint](#)
- [Sun Letters](#)

NEWS

- [Today's News](#)
- [Las Vegas](#)
- [Nevada](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [World](#)
- [Beltway](#)

BUSINESS

- [Today's Business](#)
- [Las Vegas](#)
- [Gaming](#)
- [Corporate News](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Wall Street](#)

SPORTS

- [Today's Sports](#)
- [Las Vegas](#)
- [Sports Line](#)
- [Baseball](#)
- [Basketball](#)
- [Boxing](#)
- [Football](#)
- [Golf](#)
- [Hockey](#)
- [Racing](#)
- [Soccer](#)
- [Tennis](#)

ENTERTAINMENT

- [Today's A & E](#)

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Today: November 26, 2007 at 7:12:23 PST

Flags raised as Bush's brother racks up sales

School software works, local educators say in response to watchdogs

Emily Richmond

Las Vegas Sun

Clark County school administrators and teachers deny that they were pressured to buy a classroom teaching program from a company founded by a brother of President Bush, as alleged by a Washington, D.C., watchdog group.

Local educators say they acted independently in deciding whether to buy the program. Some principals say their teachers found it helpful. Others say they didn't like it - and thus didn't buy it.

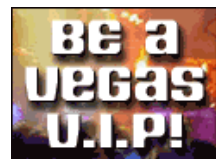
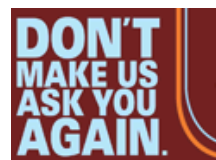
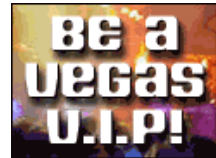
Ignite Learning Inc., a curriculum company founded by Neil Bush in 1999, is under scrutiny in Washington, D.C., because the watchdog group alleges he used political connections to secure lucrative contracts with school districts across the country. Many of the purchases were made with federal money.

Since 2003, the Clark County School District has spent \$455,000 on the company's learning products, with about \$270,000 coming from the general fund and \$185,000 paid for with federal money. Nearly all of it was used to buy units of Ignite's signature product, Curriculum on Wheels, known as the "Cow," a stand-alone device that includes software, stereo speakers and a portable projector. It gives schools a choice of math, science and social studies programs for grades 4-8, with animated sequences, songs, lectures and slide shows.

At some of the 29 schools with the Cow units, teachers told the Sun they were given the choice of whether to use the program. Some rely on it frequently, while others use the animated sequences and narratives to reinforce lessons delivered through more traditional means. A few veteran teachers said they have no interest in the software, preferring their own lesson plans.

Teacher Donna Cheney, chairwoman of the science department at Brian and Teri Cram Middle School, said the Cow is fairly well aligned with the state's standards as well as the district's own instructional benchmarks. Although Cram hasn't compared student achievement between classes that are using the Cow and those that are not, Cheney believes the program has been a good addition.

"Kids are very visual learners and it matches their abilities very well," Cheney said. "It has a lot of animation, which automatically gets their focus."



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But to the watchdog group raising questions about Ignite's contracts, anecdotal accolades fall short of the U.S. Education Department's standards for purchases with federal dollars. Citizens for Responsible Ethics in Washington (CREW), a nonprofit organization that promotes accountability in government, has asked the inspector general for the Education Department to investigate Ignite.

According to CREW, there is no scientific evidence that Ignite's products improve student learning, school districts are inappropriately using federal money to buy the products and the purchases were made largely based on political considerations.

In a letter to the inspector general, the group cited Florida, Nevada and Texas as states that used federal money to buy Ignite products. The watchdog group is most concerned about the role the Bush family relationship played in Ignite deals in Texas, where \$700,000 of federal money has been spent by 13 districts. It also alleged that political shenanigans played a part in the Clark County arrangement.

The inspector general's office said it would review the matter and take appropriate action.

As evidence that political pressure was brought to bear in Clark County, CREW cited a brief reference in an October 2006 article in the Los Angeles Times. It said, "sources familiar with the Las Vegas purchases said pressure to buy Ignite products came from Sig Rogich," a longtime Republican consultant and fundraiser who served as a top aide to Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

In an interview with the Sun, Rogich said the allegation and the subsequent complaint by the watchdog group are false. He said he did nothing more than bring Ignite's products to the attention of district officials and encourage them to judge for themselves. When several teachers and principals told him they liked the Cow, Rogich said, he personally purchased two units for his namesake middle school in Summerlin.

"In the educational community, products either work or they don't keep them around," said Rogich, who is chairman of the board of the Public Education Foundation, which raises money for local schools. "People don't buy products and put them in the closet and let them sit there."

Lori Figgins, a history teacher at Rogich Middle School, said she started using the Ignite program on her own two years ago, and she wouldn't continue to do so if she didn't think it was making a difference.

"I'm not interested in politics," said Figgins, who is in her 14th year with the district. "I'm interested in my students learning."

Christy Falba, who was the School District administrator who requested the initial Ignite purchase, said the program appealed to her because there are few products designed specifically for middle schoolers, and the district was struggling to boost test scores for those grades.

"If I hadn't found the product interesting, I wouldn't have wanted to do the pilot program," said Falba, now an administrator in the Raleigh, N.C., school district.

She recalled talking with Rogich about Ignite, and she and her husband had a dinner meeting with Neil Bush. But the product had to speak for itself, Falba said.

Neil Bush told the Sun his sales reps must make repeat visits to Clark County to sell the product to individual principals.

"We're patiently working school by school by school," Bush said. "There's a

long cycle where you have to go and demonstrate the program and talk about its efficacy and then close the sale."

Bush said the watchdog group's allegations are without merit.

"The market judges us and the products we produce," Bush said. "We've grown our business because of our product."

To suggest otherwise, Bush said, is an insult to the educators who consider that product carefully before making such purchases.

Ignite has about 60 employees and annual revenue of \$5 million to \$10 million, according to officials with the privately held company. The cost ranges from \$6,000 to \$7,000 to purchase outright, although lease options are available for \$4,250 with an annual fee of \$1,250 to maintain and update the software and device, said Ken Leonard, Ignite's president.

Clark County Schools Superintendent Walt Rulffes said he was unaware of the Ignite controversy - or that Bush founded the company - until asked about the issue by the Sun. Rulffes, who was the district's chief financial officer before becoming superintendent in late 2005, said Rogich "has certainly never called to put pressure on me to buy anything."

One of the watchdog group's central complaints is that there has been no substantive evaluation of Ignite's products and whether they have any effect on student learning. So far, there has been no Clark County School District evaluation of the current version of the Cow, which is being used at 27 middle schools and two elementary schools.

Bush said he would welcome a comprehensive evaluation but is searching for an outside partner to help fund a study and carry it out. In the meantime, he cites the "tons of anecdotal evidence" that Ignite products are effective.

"Teachers say the Ignite program made the difference," Bush said. "I wouldn't pretend to suggest that's scientific because it's not, but it's the kind of encouragement we need to grow our business."

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SEVENTH graders Brandon Hansen, left, and Nick Mallas work in Lori Figgins' history class at Rogich Middle School. She said she started using Neil Bush's company's products on her own because they work.

TIFFANY BROWN / LAS VEGAS SUN

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