



Mass. Education Chief Gets Free Travel

Team 5 Investigates Who's Paying For It

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BOSTON -- From the Great Wall of China to the Tower of London, Massachusetts Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester has seen it all. He stayed at a luxury resort in Arizona and even flew first class.

NewsCenter 5's Sean Kelly reported on Wednesday that in the past fiscal year, the commissioner took at least twelve trips costing \$15,146.80. All of those trips have been paid for, in part, by trade groups and special interests.

"The appearance that there might be a conflict when you accept free or discounted travel from a party, particularly if they have an interest in the outcome of a decision is certainly there," said Pam Wilmot from Common Cause, a nonpartisan government watchdog group.

The top sponsors of Chester's trips are two Washington, D.C. organizations: Achieve, Inc. and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Together they paid for most of Chester's travel to D.C., Chicago, Arizona and London.

Both groups are big advocates for a national set of academic standards called "Common Core" that will change the way children in Massachusetts public schools are taught and tested.

In May, the commissioner went to San Francisco courtesy of the National Education Writers Association. The purpose of the trip, according to state documents, was to talk about the new core standards. These are the same standards he recommended the state board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopt two months later.

"It's really troubling to see that he took money from them to go out and promote the standards even before Massachusetts adopted them," said Jim Stergios, executive director of the public policy research group The Pioneer Institute.

"Do you see any problem with that?" Team 5's Sean Kelly asked the commissioner. "Not at all," Chester said. "We're very careful when third parties pay for travel, that it's not a third party that wants to do business in Mass."

“But they wanted Common Core standards,” Kelly said. “They’ve been in favor of Common Core standards but we make our own decision,” Chester said.

“You see no conflict whatsoever about outside groups giving money to make sure you can travel to certain things to hear their side?” Kelly asked. “I see no conflict,” Chester said.

He also took a 10-day trip to China and Hong Kong back in April. Chester’s wife and son tagged along as well as dozens of other educators. He paid for his family’s trip with his own money. But two vendors gave him a discount, one that’s contracted by school districts throughout the state. Chester said he never disclosed the total amount.

“It wasn’t clear to me that when I was in any of these cities whether it was being supported by other local officials or other funding sources,” Chester said.

The commissioner isn’t the only one at his agency accepting free travel. Other high ranking officials in the education department have too. Team 5’s review found another 22 trips amounting to almost \$25,000 in calendar year 2009 were paid for, in part, by private interests.

The Council of Chief State School Officers never responded to Team 5's requests for comment. A spokeswoman for Achieve, Inc. said the reason why they help pay for trips is because it has become increasingly difficult for state officials to attend their meetings.

<http://www.thebostonchannel.com/print/25854414/detail.html>