

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Teacher, Students Recruited To Reelect Mayor

BY **Melissa Bailey** | SEP 1, 2011 2:06 PM

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As Mayor John DeStefano prepared to launch his first TV ads in a mayoral campaign in years, Superintendent of Schools Reggie Mayo asked his staff to find smiling students to appear on camera.

The ad (click the play arrow to watch) first aired on WTNH Channel 8 on Saturday. It is playing on a “spectrum” of other cable stations, according to Danny Kedem, spokesman for Mayor John DeStefano’s reelection campaign. The school-themed ad has been playing frequently in the run-up to the Sept. 13 Democratic primary, where DeStefano faces three opponents in the most competitive election since 2001. School started Thursday for grades 1 to 12 in all schools that have power.

Mayo’s recruitment of staff brought rebukes from DeStefano’s three opponents, who accused DeStefano of abusing the power of his incumbency to further his campaign. Kedem replied that all the people in the ad were volunteers who were happy to participate.

The TV spot features a teacher, a principal, some parents and some students of several age groups. The students came from Head Start and New Haven Public Schools classrooms, according to Kedem. The ad was filmed at the Mauro-Sheridan Science, Technology and Communications School at 191 Fountain Ave., Kedem said.

The commercial came as a surprise to many viewers when it popped up last weekend amid round-the-clock hurricane coverage: DeStefano doesn't usually invest in television spots in a mayoral race. His most recent mayoral TV ad in memory came in 2003, when he released a commercial featuring the mayor riding a bicycle around town with the motto "Pedal Power."

The new ad touts DeStefano's expansion of pre-K, his \$1.5 billion school rebuilding program and his spearheading of New Haven Promise, a college scholarship program funded by Yale and the Community Foundation For Greater New Haven.



MELISSA BAILEY PHOTO

DeStefano & Mayo at Wednesday's school board meeting.

Reached Wednesday after a school board meeting, Superintendent Mayo was asked how the students ended up at the campaign event.

"There were a couple of kids that we recruited from schools," Mayo said.

"I asked some of our staff did they think they had any students that wouldn't mind doing that, and parents," Mayo said.

The video shows Danielle Zito, a pre-school teacher at Davis Street School, posing with a class of children, Davis Street Principal Lola Nathan along with some kids in uniform t-shirts, and a class of what appear to be high school students.

DeStefano's three challengers took issue with the top school official asking people who work for him to support the mayor's campaign.

Jeffrey Kerekes said the action fits a pattern of "questionable behavior."

"John DeStefano has a long history of using the power of his office for his own personal gain. Whether it is his run for governor or for mayor, he shakes down city contractors and employees in large part, to fund his campaign. The next logical step on this slippery slope is to have big dollar department heads lean on their subordinates in order to put him in the most favorable light."

"This all shows that John has to in effect, cheat his way back into office by "recruiting" school children to

participate in campaign videos instead of natural supporters,” Kerekes said. He didn’t give evidence that Mayo had “leaned on” any individuals.

Kerekes called on DeStefano to “take down the ad and restore some legitimacy to his campaign and in doing so, he will be reminded who he really works for - the taxpayers and citizens of this great city.”

Tony Dawson called the making of the ad “abuse of power.”

“It’s the same as [DeStefano] accepting money from” people who work for the city, he argued.

DeStefano “should have used some outside actors,” Dawson suggested. “It’s not a good thing to put students in the middle of it.”

“Everybody knows the extremely close relationship between the mayor and Dr. Mayo, and it doesn’t surprise me that the superintendent would use his office to try to support the campaign,” said Clifton Graves. “But it does raise ethical questions.”

All the people who appear in the commercial are unpaid “volunteers,” according to Kedem. “The people in our ad were excited to participate. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t have come.”

“It is natural for the Mayor’s opposing candidates to want to throw out tons of complaints against him,” Kedem said in an emailed statement. “It is also natural for people who are closest to the schools and city government to want to support a candidate who demonstrates a clear vision in getting our kids into college and making the right investments for our families. The people who volunteered to be in our commercial were happy to do so. Other interpretations are just sour grapes.”

Principal Nathan, who appears in the spot, said the kids in the video are not students at her school. Asked how she came to participate in the ad, she said, “They asked me to. You have to call the superintendent’s office and the mayor’s office” for more details on where the students came from.

Kedem said the campaign “rented the space” for the filming of the ad.

“Well, we more paid for the staff’s time,” he clarified. The campaign paid \$96 for staff to keep the school open.

Incumbents’ use of government resources for campaigns has proven controversial in the past. Gov. M. Jodi Rell’s chief of staff, M. Lisa Moody, faced a 13-month investigation after she used state time and equipment to provide the governor’s 2006 election campaign an official state email list. She was [cleared of wrongdoing](#). Susan Bysiewicz caused a stir when she took a database of citizens who had called her office when she was secretary of state, complete with detailed information about their personal lives, and used it for a subsequent campaign. A [probe found her guilty of “improper use”](#) of the data.

DeStefano’s ad does not appear to rise to the level of violating state law.

State Elections Enforcement Commission spokeswoman Nancy Nicolescu declined to comment on the specifics of this case; she instead referred the Independent to several subsections of state election law.

The only one that seemed relevant is Sec. 9-610(5)(12), which prohibits municipal employees from “solicit[ing] a contribution on behalf of” a candidate for municipal office from “an individual under the supervision of such employee.” However, the [definition of “contribution”](#) does not appear to be applicable here. (“Uncompensated services provided by individuals volunteering their time” are not considered a “contribution.”)

Comments

posted by: anon on September 1, 2011 2:11pm

Mayo gets somewhere near \$150/hour in benefits and salary. Did the campaign pay for his time as a casting director?

posted by: Morris Cove Mom on September 1, 2011 2:26pm

This ad is creepy, the statements he makes are vague and almost-untrue, and the people in it shouldn’t be in it. It’s one thing to use my kids for a public schools brochure...they go to the schools in New Haven. It’s quite another thing to use it for personal and political gain. He should be ashamed, but as we’ve seen for years, he’s

not. He doesn't hold himself accountable for anything. BTW - He takes a lot of credit for the New Haven Promise program, but he didn't invent it. Several other cities in the US were doing it years before; he just modified the idea slightly to fit the teen crime and dropout rate in New Haven.

posted by: Noteworthy on September 1, 2011 2:28pm

A critique of DeStefano's chronic ethical issues of shaking down city employees and contractors and leaning on them to support his re-election among other issues is sour grapes? That's just funny. How so? These people didn't turn Kerekes down in favor of the John. They may or may not have been "happy volunteers" when your boss calls up and asks you to do something. I just hope they weren't told they were all coming to a Head Start fun time, only to be told later, uh, you have to do this first.

Interesting that DeStefano had to use the two groups who just got sweetheart contracts from him as "happy volunteers." Teachers and administrators - both got nice raises worth millions of dollars and minimal changes to their contracts. Guess we won't be seeing the "son of a cop" posing and preening with the men in blue any time soon.

posted by: Elaine on September 1, 2011 2:32pm

I'm not offended by the ad and use of staff & students. As a New Haven parent, I too I'm grateful for the push for new school buildings, higher test scores and The New Haven Promise Scholarship program. I'm very glad that Mayor DeStefano has made the education of the children in the city of New Haven a top priority.

posted by: Davis Street Parent on September 1, 2011 2:40pm

I am extremely disappointed that Zito and Nathan would support the same man who threatened to lay off hundreds of teachers and custodians. We now see where your paycheck, oops, I mean, loyalty stands...I seriously hope it was worth selling your soul to the devil!

posted by: Shame on you, Dr. Mayo and Mayor Destefano on September 1, 2011 2:50pm

Unlike Elaine, I am offended by the use of board of education personnel and students in a political ad because the schools should be apolitical. Mayor Destefano, as the incumbent (who appoints the board of education members who hire the superintendent), has an unfair advantage. If Dr. Mayo doesn't understand how unprofessional and unethical his involvement was in recruiting these people for a shameless political commercial, then he is even less qualified to be superintendent than I previously thought.

As for Elaine's assertion that the mayor has made the education of students a top priority, I say that school buildings don't provide quality education; people do. The mayor should be looking for the best people to teach in the schools and to provide the leadership for the individual schools, as well as the school district. Given some toxic administrators and some questionable teachers, I have not seen evidence of that level of commitment.

posted by: Bill Saunders on September 1, 2011 3:05pm

If the Mayor is going to use children as political pawns, maybe we should extend voting rights to pre-schoolers, so at least they will get a fair say at the polls.

And at last, my long lingering question regarding the much lauded school re-building program—

If the City has spent 1.5 billion on new schools, and if All City-Owned, non-taxable real estate holdings are currently valued at 1 billion (per recent NHI article by Andy Ross), where did all of the equity go?

Bad market, or bad administration?

posted by: anon on September 1, 2011 3:27pm

Here is the best. NHI posts story at 2:06pm. Kerekes lengthy email blast to ALL city employees at with details of story and direct link to story at 2:08pm.

posted by: observor on September 1, 2011 3:33pm

I find the add quite humorous in that you have a handful of supposed "volunteers" to film a commercial. Out of the total people you have one eligible voter, maybe, depending on the teachers address.

The mayor's "I know who I work for" comment has been proven time and time again it is not for the employees of the city nor the taxpayers. His ruthless use of his power over employees and taxpayers only changes when it is

election time. He has used that power repeatedly to offer sweetheart deals for votes only to turn a round after the elections and screw the very people he made promises too.

Now when his fiscal irresponsibility shown through the use of his "deals" starts to come back to haunt him he tries to have us believe he is open, honest and working for the taxpayer. One add does not change proven years of the neglect of the betterment of the city of New Haven nor the screwing over of the employees.

The statement issued by his campaign manager is not surprising in that he WORKS FOR DESTEFANO, so what do you expect him to say.

The add does accomplish one thing. More lies to give reason to vote him out !!!

posted by: anon on September 1, 2011 3:40pm

Bill, much of that \$1.5 Billion cost went into salaries, engineering fees, corporate contracts, community "consultations," overhead, gasoline to keep trucks idling, police overtime, etc. Also, some of it went into public infrastructure which is not real estate.

For example, the new downtown high school, which cost taxpayers somewhere near \$70 million, is not worth even a quarter of that amount as real estate.

Some of the schools were turned from complete wrecks with almost no value beyond their land, into pieces of physical capital with some value. But as real estate, they are worth nowhere near what they cost to build. That changes if you start figuring in their public value as social and educational infrastructure.

posted by: observor on September 1, 2011 3:57pm

To Bill Saunders

One only has to do simple math to show that there were serious errors made by someone in our city, including the mayor and BOE.

School value to build 1.5 billion

TOTAL value of city property assets per the NHI article... 1 Billion

So the result is the MAYOR and MAYO (add an R for the same person) spent .5 billion more on the schools than all the ENTIRE city property value, including the new schools, combined which indicates all city property values are ZERO or in the negative!!!!

And the administration blames the current city fiscal crisis on the unionized employees and their benefit/retirement packages? Hardly true !!

Clearly a bad administration !!!!!

posted by: Anymouse on September 1, 2011 4:03pm

I'm voting for the Mayoral candidate who has the guts to point out that unions are buying up Aldermanic seats using campaign finance loopholes.

Destefano has come the closest to doing that so far with his endorsements. Rock on John. Nice video.

posted by: Cedarhillresident on September 1, 2011 4:09pm

Gee looking at that you would of thought this was one of those crafty come to new haven school videos or head start. Have to wonder if that is what the parents thought it was when they gave the written permission to film their children.

I must admit I saw this during the storm and totally fell over laughing. I built schools, improved test scores, and best of the best... I know who I work for... Priceless!!

@ "anon" with a small "a"

all 3 challengers were interviewed about it. They knew it was coming. Why not prepare a response?

posted by: astonished parent on September 1, 2011 5:28pm

This ad disgusts me because it fits into DeStefano's continuing pattern of politicizing the schools and using our children inappropriately. I'm less concerned about those who obviously consented to participate than with the small children in the background. Did every one of their parents consent to their involvement? If not, DeStefano and the NHPS may have violated the law. A full investigation is essential. If Mayo and/or DeStefano violated the law by using these small children, criminal prosecution is absolutely called for. Meanwhile, Reggie Mayo, you

need to take some ethics refresher courses, assuming you have ever taken any in the first place. SHAME!!!!

posted by: reality check on September 1, 2011 5:44pm

By this newspaper's own reporting (admittedly at the end) the campaign broke no rules with this ad.

If anyone should be worrying about the law it is this newspaper, whose coverage of this elections is extremely biased. Non-profit organizations by law cannot endorse political candidates and the NHI has through its coverage done just that.

posted by: noteworthy on September 1, 2011 5:58pm

Anon-

Its great isn't it? Rapid response. City employees were probably surprised to see the new definition of community service.

By the way...do these "employee volunteers" at least live in the city?

posted by: Bill Saunders on September 1, 2011 6:10pm

Anon & Observer,

Thanks for doing the math and making the proper points.
Amazing what you discover looking at numbers.

Didn't Destefano say over the recent bonding sale, that that money was primarily for jobs, when in reality, it was for the bloated school building expenses we could not afford?

Face it, John DeMayo must prop up the schools, otherwise he must recognize them as the financial albatross they are.

posted by: Curious on September 1, 2011 6:31pm

Why shouldn't DeStefano pack the ad with kid actors?

When you go around downtown to see who DeStefano's supporters are, the only yard signs you will see are on rental properties belonging to Pike International Realty, not regular folks' homes.

posted by: FacChec on September 1, 2011 6:56pm

For video identification purposes,

Lola Nathan is the principal of Davis street Magnet school. Her salary is \$129,823.

Davis is a high performing magnet school whose students are encouraged to wear uniforms. The kids in the video with Ms. Nathan for the most part have on similar blue uniform tops.

A bio on Davis street school says..

"Davis street features two bands: the 21C marching band and the little peoples bands. Both bands perform locally in parades, celebrations and SPECIAL EVENTS'.

With this background and experience it's little wonder why Mayo tapped Nathan and the little bands to play along.

"Principal Nathan, who appears in the spot, said the kids in the video are not students at her school. Asked how she came to participate in the ad, she said, "They asked me to. You have to call the superintendent's office and the mayor's office" for more details on where the students came from.

Ohhhh, I doubt that response, Lola.

posted by: manners on September 1, 2011 7:31pm

Shenanigans once agin!

posted by: elisabeth cruz on September 1, 2011 8:45pm

Interesting that we are rewarding for something that should be a given..I was raised to go to school everyday, do well, work hard..that was expected. Now you get to go to college for free..

posted by: I'm a davis street parent too on September 1, 2011 9:01pm

I am a Davis Street parent for 2 young children. When I first moved to New Haven, I did not find much value in the New Haven public school system. Today, I am proud of the new school and the tier one rating it received. I know Mayor DeStefano has been an instrumental force in revitalizing education in New Haven.

posted by: brutus2011 on September 1, 2011 9:24pm

First rate propaganda.

Is it going to work?

Time will tell.

posted by: parent on September 1, 2011 9:34pm

You guys sound so petty, Destefano ad is about the new haven promise with Yale ,What's is so wrong with the ad in involving teachers and students,yes it's a campaign but it's also about the childrens future.

posted by: richgetricher on September 1, 2011 10:07pm

I'm highly offended by this but it's another example of in-your-face abuse of power. It's no different from a propaganda piece that might be done in any Third World dictatorship. The Mayor has tons of money and this is what he's spending it on - having the superintendent "recruit" some "smiling" students and teachers to surround him for a paid political ad?! Did the parents know their kids would be used to shill the Mayor's election message? Can a student or teacher say NO, when "recruited" by their boss, Mayo? Really this is too much. On 9/13 we get our chance to put an end to this.

posted by: Natalie on September 1, 2011 10:40pm

I don't know why some of the other candidates are even running. I would say they are wasting their money but I don't see them spending any—no ads, no websites.

We all know DeStefano's dedication to education and building schools. I think it is sincere and commendable. I admire his confidence and applaud his efforts and successes in making New Haven a better place. As another poster wrote, Rock on John!

posted by: Fair Haven Res on September 1, 2011 10:46pm

This is just deplorable.

New Haven Promise is such a wonderful thing for our kids and for our city. It should not become part of a political campaign.

DeStefano's campaign is already using desperate tactics. His political machine is crumbling, and so he reaches out to the schools.

We should remember that DeStefano built these many fancy schools for a city who has a declining birth rate, and still with very low test scores. The money, that DeStefano spent like a drunken sailor, was not his or the city's but was from the state of Connecticut. The money has run out. What does he has to offer? He has burnt his bridges with the unions, because the money has run out.

Well, I could go on, but suffice to say, it is just time of a change. Time has just run out. John, just stop now.

posted by: anon on September 1, 2011 10:46pm

And Paul and Melissa are never used by anybody, because they are so smart.

posted by: westvillelocal on September 2, 2011 1:40am

How is it Johnny gets to use city property like Mauro-Sheridan to campaign on while Kerekes is all but run out of city hall?

posted by: westvillelocal on September 2, 2011 1:48am

All the people who appear in the commercial are unpaid "volunteers," according to Kedem. "The people in our ad were excited to participate. If they weren't, they wouldn't have come."

Am I to believe that the children in this ad decided on their own that wanted to be in the ad?

Also did the Johnnys campaign get documented permission from parents/guardians for the children (minors) to be used in the ad?

posted by: cedarhillresident on September 2, 2011 7:03am

@ parent

No this is a campaign ad.
