



Report of Investigation

The Professional Development Alliance & Vista Learning, NFP

Prepared for:

Dr. Lisa Caparelli-Ruff, Superintendent
Will County Regional Office of Education

December 20, 2023

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Lisa Caparelli-Ruff (“Dr. Caparelli-Ruff”) was elected to her position as Superintendent of Will County Regional Office of Education on November 29, 2022, and was sworn into office on July 3, 2023. Soon after, she identified irregularities in the financial reporting of the Professional Development Alliance – of which the Will County Regional Office of Education is a member. She retained Prescient on November 1, 2023, to investigate these irregularities and provide a report of any findings. Dr. Caparelli-Ruff also retained Garrett Discovery Inc. to examine five servers that were abandoned by the Professional Development Alliance. Garrett Discovery imaged and analyzed numerous relevant emails from these servers.

At the direction of Dr. Caparelli-Ruff, Prescient conducted research regarding the Professional Development Alliance and its alleged inappropriate ties with Vista Learning NFP, EvaluWise, and The Majestic Isle Casino. Dr. Caparelli-Ruff also asked Prescient to investigate whether certain Professional Development Alliance employees’ participation in the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund was inappropriate.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Professional Development Alliance (“PDA”) is an intergovernmental agency that has become a major service provider for a private business enterprise, Vista Learning NFP (“Vista”), as well as the Majestic Island Casino located in Antigua.
- Certain PDA employees are paid by Vista, with their salaries passed through the PDA’s payroll, enabling the employees to be eligible for state pension benefits. This practice may be illegal.
- Some PDA employees working for Vista are contracted to spend as much as 90% or 100% of their time – the duty hours required for pension eligibility – on work for Vista, not the PDA. This likely falls outside the guidelines for eligibility set forth by the pension fund.
- The PDA and Vista have overlapping governance. PDA board members also sat on the board of Vista, including current Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent Chris Mehochko. Jay Linksman served as executive director of both the PDA and Vista. The PDA and Vista entered into service agreements benefiting Vista, likely violating state law that bars public officeholders from involvement in such contracts.
- The PDA and Vista have overlapping operations. Vista has always used PDA resources – such as servers – in its operations, which included tech support and services for private companies. This likely violates state law, which limits the use of public funds and property for public functions only.
- Vista paid certain PDA employees hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonuses, which would violate laws banning gifts to public employees.
- The PDA has violated the intergovernmental agreement that authorized its creation. The agreement, which set out that the PDA was to provide professional development services to school districts, never made a provision for the PDA to contract out its employees or resources.
- It is likely that once the questionable relationship between the PDA and Vista was made public in local media, individuals involved attempted to cover it up.

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH VISTA LEARNING NFP

The Creation of the Professional Development Alliance

In 1995, the Professional Development Alliance ("PDA") was established through an intergovernmental agreement between the Will County and Grundy/Kendall Regional Offices of Education ("ROE").¹ Its purpose was to administer professional development services for the school districts belonging to these ROEs, and it was to be funded by the professional development budgets allocated to the ROEs by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Intergovernmental Agreement Between the Will County
Regional Office of Education and the Grundy Kendall
County Regional Office of Education for the Delivery of
Professional Development Services: ROE Professional
Development Alliance

PARTICIPANTS:

The Will County Regional Office of Education and the Grundy Kendall Regional Office of Education, legal entities as established by 105 ILCS 5/3-15.15, enter into an intergovernmental agreement to provide professional development services for the local school districts of Will, Grundy and Kendall Counties. In keeping with the spirit of cooperation among Regional Offices of Education and local school districts, this intergovernmental agreement shall be known as the ROE Professional Development Alliance (PDA).

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this Intergovernmental Agreement shall be the cooperative combination of resources from the Will County Regional office of Education and the Grundy Kendall County Regional Office of Education for the planning and delivery of professional development services under Section 2-3.62 of the *School Code*, 105 ILCS 5/2-3.62 to the local school districts under their respective jurisdictions. This shall be achieved through the cooperative administration, financing, planning, and monitoring of the PDA.

The intent of this Intergovernmental Agreement is the maintenance and improvement of services and continued employment of staff provided by the former Educational Service Center

#10. Services and staff assignments shall be performed under this Intergovernmental Agreement by the PDA.

¹ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PDA-K-G-ROE-ROE-Intergovernmental-Agreement.pdf>

As set forth in the agreement, the Board of Governors for the PDA was to be made up of the Will County and Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendents and two additional superintendents or designees from each ROE, for a total of six members.²

The Creation of Vista Learning NFP

In February 2004, eight years after the PDA was formed, Vista Learning NFP (“Vista”) was incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation. Initially, Vista had four directors: Jay Linksman (PDA Executive Director), Richard Duran (Will County ROE Superintendent), Thomas Centowski (Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent), and Paul Swanstrom (Joliet High School District Superintendent).³

Overlapping Governance and Operations

Since Vista’s inception, it has had overlapping governance and operations with the PDA. ROE superintendents – also members of the PDA Board of Governors – sit on the board of Vista, while serving as superintendents.⁴

<u>Vista Learning NFP</u>		
<u>Board Member</u>	<u>Board Term</u>	<u>Relevant Employment</u>
Jay Linksman (founding director)	2004 - present	Professional Development Alliance Executive Director
Thomas Centowski (founding director)	2004 - 2007	Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent (2000 - 2007)
Richard Duran (founding director)	2004 - 2013	Will County ROE Superintendent (1995 - 2007)
Paul Swanstrom (founding director)	2004 - 2013	Joliet Township High School Superintendent (2002-2011)
Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	2008 - 2020	Will County ROE Superintendent (2007 - 2013)
Paul Nordstrom	2008 - present	Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent (2007 - 2013)
Larry Wiers	2010 - present	Troy School District Superintendent (2001 - 2007)
Shawn Walsh	2014 - 2023	Will County ROE Superintendent (2013 - 2023)

² The agreement appears to contain an error: it sets forth that in addition to the ROE Superintendents, “the board shall also consist of two additional superintendents and/or designees, two from Will County, one from Grundy County and one from Kendall County.” (emphasis added)

³ Vista Learning NFP, 2005-2007 annual reports filed with the Illinois Secretary of State.

⁴ Vista Learning NFP, 2005-2022 annual reports filed with the Illinois Secretary of State.

Chris Mehochko	2014 - 2023	Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent (2013 - present)
Patti Furlano	2014 - present	ROE/PDA Regional Coordinator (1998 - 2013)
Diane Cepela	2023 - present	Fairmont School District Superintendent (2017 - 2022)

See Appendix B for a detailed chart of Vista's board members throughout its existence.

Vista's Board Members

Until this year, whoever held the office of Will County ROE Superintendent, served as the Vista board's president and treasurer; as reported to the Illinois Secretary of State in early 2023, the seats were transferred to the Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent.

- Jay Linksman has been executive director of both the PDA and Vista since their inception and serves as Vista's board secretary.
- Paul Nordstrom was vice president of Vista's board from 2008 to 2013, while he was Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent.⁵ He remained on the Vista board as a director after leaving office.
- Larry Wiers joined the Vista board as a director in 2010, after retiring as superintendent of the Troy School District, where he had worked since the 1970s.^{6 7}
- Patti Furlano ("Furlano") became vice president of the Vista board as of January 2023. She had been a board director for Vista since 2014. Previously, from 1998 to 2013, Furlano was reportedly a regional coordinator for the PDA.⁸ According to publicly available records, as a former employee of the PDA, Furlano receives monthly annuities of approximately \$1,400 from the IMRF.⁹

⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/paul-nordstrom-aa296546>

⁶ <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/95/HR/PDF/09500HR0376lv.pdf>

⁷ <https://lewisflyers.com/news/2022/5/26/general-lewis-athletics-to-unveil-2022-hall-of-fame-class-at-flyer-athletic-fund-golf-outing.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/patti-furlano-22357a10/>

⁹ <https://www.openthebooks.com/members/employer-detail/?Id=70873&tab=2>

- Grundy/Kendall ROE Superintendent Chris Mehochko (“Mehochko”) became Vista’s board president and treasurer as of 2023.¹⁰ He previously served as vice president on the board. Mehochko, as noted later in this report, signed Vista’s questionable new contract with the Grundy/Kendall ROE. (See: [The Attempted Coverup.](#))
- Until losing his seat as Will County ROE Superintendent in the last election, Shawn Walsh (“Walsh”) was Vista’s board president and secretary. He is now Director of District/School Leadership at the Illinois State Board of Education.¹¹ Walsh is well-connected, through his family, to Illinois politics: his father, Larry Walsh, was Will County Executive in 2013, when Walsh was appointed by the Will County Board to fill the ROE Superintendent position;¹² and his brother, Larry Walsh Jr., is an Illinois State Representative.^{13 14}

Although Vista reported to the Illinois Secretary of State that these six individuals would make up its board for 2023, the organization appears to have changed plans. Vista updated its website sometime after June 10, 2023, removing Walsh and Mehochko from its list of board members, and making Furlano president and treasurer.¹⁵ Added to the board was Dr. Diane Cepela, a retired school superintendent.¹⁶ (See: [The Attempted Coverup.](#))

Operational Overlap

In addition to its governance, the operations of the PDA and Vista appear to have significant overlap since Vista’s formation in 2004.

Jay Linksman (“Linksman”) has served as executive director of both the PDA and Vista since each was formed. The PDA and Vista share an address, 2705 McDonough Street in Joliet.^{17 18}

¹⁰ Vista Learning NFP, 2023 Annual Report filed with the Illinois Secretary of State.

¹¹ <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ISBE-Org-Chart.pdf>

¹² <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/ct-xpm-2013-02-14-chi-walsh-will-county-school-superintendent-20130214-story.html>

¹³ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/naperville-sun/ct-nvs-will-county-exec-larry-walsh-dead-st-0605-20200604-7ybiecpbbngjhfmq2ieih35xu-story.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.ilga.gov/house/Rep.asp?GA=103&MemberID=3059>

¹⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230610142441/https://vistalearning.org/about-us/board-members>

¹⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/diane-cepela-5179ab10/>

¹⁷ <https://www.vistalearning.org/about-us>


¹⁸ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/dr-jay-linksman>

Vista's website was registered by the PDA's Jason Bross ("Bross") on April 29, 2004.¹⁹ Bross has been employed by the PDA since the 1990s, according to the agency's website.²⁰


Domain Name:VISTALEARNING.ORG	
Created On:29-Apr-2004 15:22:51 UTC	
Last Updated On:29-Jun-2004 03:52:16 UTC	
Expiration Date:29-Apr-2014 15:22:51 UTC	
Sponsoring Registrar:Network Solutions LLC (R63-LROR)	
Status:CLIENT TRANSFER PROHIBITED	
Registrant ID:37775780-NSI	Admin ID:33480261-NSI
Registrant Name:Vista Learning	Admin Name:Jason Bross
Registrant Organization:Vista Learning	Admin Organization:Professional Development Alliance
Registrant Street1:2705 McDonough St.	Admin Street1:2705 McDonough St.
Registrant Street2:	Admin Street2:
Registrant Street3:	Admin Street3:
Registrant City:Joliet	Admin City:Joliet
Registrant State/Province:IL	Admin State/Province:IL
Registrant Postal Code:60436	Admin Postal Code:60436
Registrant Country:US	Admin Country:US
Registrant Phone:+1.8157448334	Admin Phone:+1.815744833
Registrant Phone Ext.:	Admin Phone Ext.:
Registrant FAX:+1.8157448396	Admin FAX:+1.815744839
Registrant FAX Ext.:	Admin FAX Ext.:
Registrant Email:postmaster@vistalearning.org	Admin Email:jbross@pdaonline.org


Domain registration record for vistaonline.org

PDA employees have not hidden their associations with Vista. Longtime PDA employee Mary Chignoli uploaded a picture file for the agency's logo, which also included Vista, to her LinkedIn profile.²¹



Professional Development Alliance
20 yrs 3 mos

- Director Of Professional Development**
Aug 2017 - Present · 6 yrs 5 mos
Joliet, IL
 PDA-Vista.png
- Educational Consultant**
Oct 2003 - Aug 2017 · 13 yrs 11 mos
Joliet, IL



PDA-Vista.png

Mary Chignoli LinkedIn profile

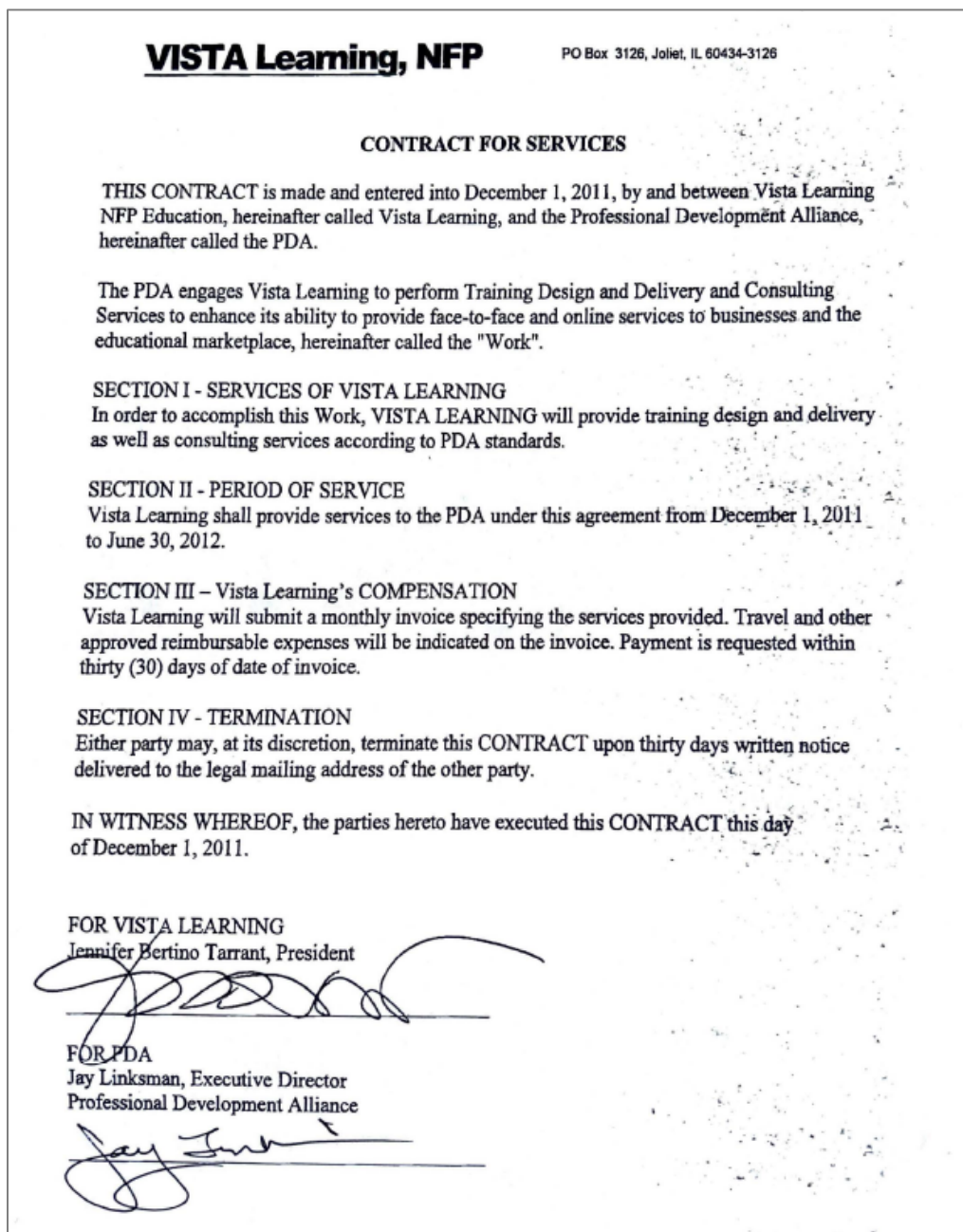
¹⁹ Jason Bross/PDA remained the domain's administrative contact until 2014, when its registration records were made private.

²⁰ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/jason-bross>

²¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mary-chignoli-b9b81bb8/>

Additional PDA employees, such as Joel Rogers²² and Tara Ehlers,²³ include in their staff descriptions on the PDA website that they do work for Vista. (See also: [The Attempted Coverup.](#))

In 2011 and 2012, at least, Vista was contracted to provide services for the PDA, as shown in agreements signed in those years:



2011 Vista/PDA contract

²² <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/joel-rogers>

²³ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/tara-ehlers>

CONTRACT FOR SERVICES

THIS CONTRACT is made and entered into July 1, 2012, by and between Vista Learning NFP Education, hereinafter called Vista Learning, and the Professional Development Alliance, hereinafter called the PDA.

The PDA engages Vista Learning to perform Training Design and Delivery and Consulting Services to enhance its ability to provide face-to-face and online services to businesses and the educational marketplace, hereinafter called the "Work".

SECTION I - SERVICES OF VISTA LEARNING

In order to accomplish this Work, VISTA LEARNING will provide training design and delivery as well as consulting services according to PDA standards.

SECTION II - PERIOD OF SERVICE

Vista Learning shall provide services to the PDA under this agreement from July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2013.

SECTION III - Vista Learning's COMPENSATION

Vista Learning will submit a monthly invoice specifying the services provided. Travel and other approved reimbursable expenses will be indicated on the invoice. Payment is requested within thirty (30) days of date of invoice.

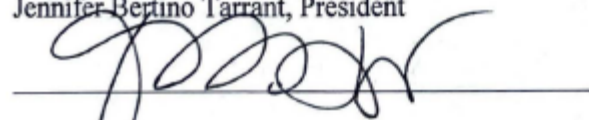
SECTION IV - TERMINATION

Either party may, at its discretion, terminate this CONTRACT upon thirty days written notice delivered to the legal mailing address of the other party.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have executed this CONTRACT this day of July 1, 2012.

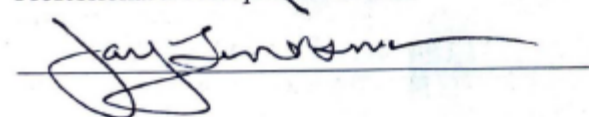
FOR VISTA LEARNING

Jennifer Bertino Tarrant, President



FOR PDA

Jay Linksman, Executive Director
Professional Development Alliance



Early Operations and Funding

In early versions of Vista's website, it advertised teacher training services, technology installation and support services for outside organizations, and charity work (Computers 2 Kids in Need).²⁴

In 2014, Vista was required for the first time to file a detailed disclosure form with the Internal Revenue Service. At that time, it publicly disclosed for the first time that it was intricately connected to the PDA:²⁵

Our organization (Vista Learning, NFP supported by the Will, Grundy and Kendall Regional Offices of Education and Professional Development Alliance) solicits donations of used computers and then rebuilds them so they can be gifted to needy children who have been identified by their school principals and teachers as those who will benefit academically.

Vista also disclosed, for the first – and last – time, the sources of its revenue from program services:²⁶

Program Service Revenue		Business Code		
	2a EVALUWISE SOFTWARE		187,211	
	b REMOTE MANAGEMENT		31,637	
	c TECHNICAL SUPPORT/ WEB DESIGN		27,960	
	d WEB, EMAIL HOSTING & SPAM		21,827	
	e			
	f All other program service revenue.			
	g Total. Add lines 2a–2f	268,635		

Vista Learning, 2014 Form 990

It is certain that at least some of the technical support services disclosed here benefited a private business – a casino, which was also connected to a PDA employee, Hallie Brenczewski, through her husband, Derek Brenczewski. (For more information about Vista's work for the Brenczewskis and their casino venture, see: [The PDA and Vista's Private Ventures With Public Resources.](#))

²⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20071231143300/http://www.vistalearning.org/Services/TechServices.htm>

²⁵ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201521329349301392/full>



²⁶ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201521329349301392/full>

The EvaluWise Contracts

In 2013, nearly 10 years after its founding, Vista began selling an online teacher evaluation tool called EvaluWise, despite a stated mission of providing refurbished computers for needy students.



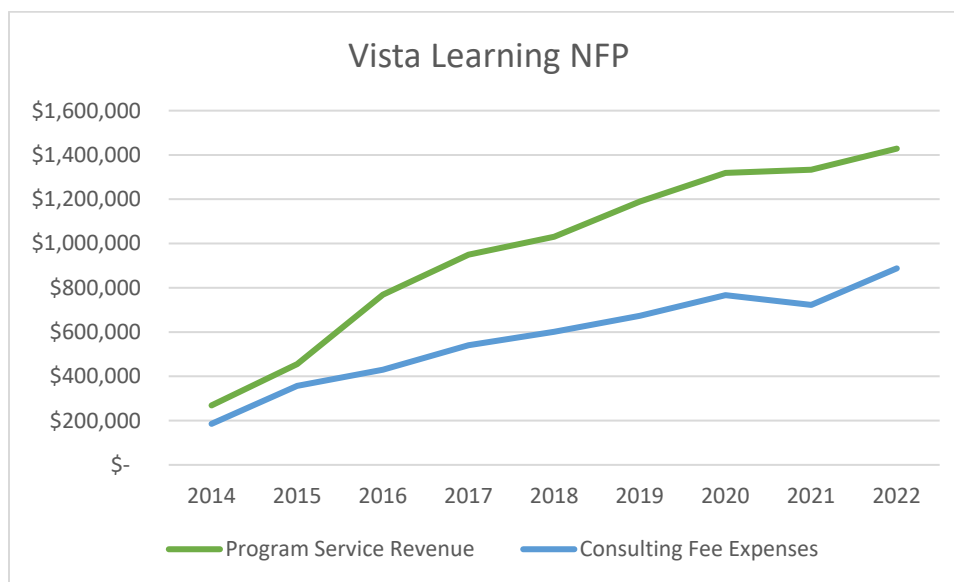
2013 capture of vistalearning.org front page

Mark:	EVALUWISE		
US Serial Number:	85909320	Application Filing Date:	Apr. 19, 2013
US Registration Number:	4450703	Registration Date:	Dec. 17, 2013
Filed as TEAS Plus:	Yes	Currently TEAS Plus:	Yes
Register:	Principal		
Mark Type:	Service Mark		
TM5 Common Status Descriptor:		LIVE/REGISTRATION/Issued and Active	
		The trademark application has been registered with the Office.	
Status:	The registration has been renewed.		
Status Date:	Oct. 01, 2023		
Publication Date:	Oct. 01, 2013		
▲ Mark Information ▼ Expand All			
▲ Goods and Services			
▲ Basis Information (Case Level)			
▼ Current Owner(s) Information			
Owner Name:	Vista Learning, NFP		
Owner Address:	2705 McDonough St. Joliet, ILLINOIS UNITED STATES 60436		

EvaluWise Trademark Registration

EvaluWise soon became a profitable enterprise for Vista, which it sold directly and through software sales agreements with companies like Florida’s Teach N Kids Learn.²⁷ It reported program service revenue of \$268,635 in 2014, and \$455,498 by the next year.^{28 29} By 2022, the most recent tax disclosure form available, Vista reported over \$1.4 million in program service revenue.

Somehow, Vista achieved this revenue while reporting zero employees in federal tax disclosure forms. The organization did, however, report paying large consulting fees, jumping from \$185,359 in 2014 to \$357,204 in 2015, and since then climbing to \$887,668 in 2022.³⁰



(These consulting payments correspond with the wages reported by the PDA; see [The Pension Benefits](#), below.)

Vista’s growth – in revenue and expenses – appears to have been facilitated by a 2013 contract signed by the organization and the PDA.³¹ In it, the PDA agreed to provide technical services in support of EvaluWise. The contract was signed by ROE Superintendent/Vista board president Shawn Walsh on behalf of Vista, and PDA/Vista executive director Jay Linksman on behalf of the

²⁷ <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/evaluwise-and-teach-n-kids-learn-tkl-announce-partnership-to-provide-online-personalized-professional-development-based-on-specific-skills-identified-through-teacher-evaluation-300711029.html>

²⁸ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201521329349301392/full>

²⁹ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201611629349300111/full>

³⁰ These consulting fees do not include legal or accounting fees, which are reported separately.

³¹ https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PDA_Vista-6-1-2013.pdf

PDA. Previously, in 2011 and 2012, the PDA and Vista had signed agreements in which Vista provided services to the PDA.

VISTA Learning, NFP

PO Box 3126, Joliet, IL 60434-3126

CONTRACT FOR SERVICES FOR EVALUWISE™ SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT, HOSTING, MARKETING, AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

THIS CONTRACT is made and entered into June 1, 2013, by and between Vista Learning NFP, hereinafter called Vista Learning, and the Professional Development Alliance, hereinafter called the PDA.

Vista Learning engages PDA to provide specific technical services including but not limited to software and application development, hosting, marketing and technical support, hereinafter called the "Work".

SECTION I - SERVICES OF PDA

In order to accomplish this Work, PDA will provide contracted services, as well as required hardware and software as needed according to Vista Learning standards.

SECTION II - PERIOD OF SERVICE

PDA shall provide services to Vista Learning under this agreement starting June 1, 2013 until the contract is terminated.

2013 Vista/PDA Contract for EvaluWise Services

The PDA and Vista signed a new service agreement in 2017, outlining explicitly that Vista would pay a portion of the salaries of certain PDA employees while the PDA provided payroll services.³² Vista would also rent space from the PDA, keeping it in close contact with the "contracted" PDA employees.

- II. **Services Provided.** PDA shall provide technical and administrative services to Vista Learning including but not limited to the programming, development and maintenance of software, websites, email and applications for mobile devices, hereinafter called the "Work." In addition, PDA shall provide payroll and administrative support services.

³² <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CamScanner-09-13-2023-12.42.pdf>
Shawn Walsh (on behalf of Vista) and Jay Linksman (on behalf of the PDA) again signed the agreement.

IV. Payment

A. **Amount of Compensation.** As compensation for the services to be rendered under this Agreement, Vista Learning shall pay PDA the following monthly amounts by the first day of each month beginning after the Effective Date, allocated based on the following staffing assumptions and as the parties may periodically update by mutual agreement:

1. Staffing costs (with assumptions based on current staff):
Joel Rogers, 218 days per year, $\$8070 \times 12 = 96840$
Steven Scranton, 218 days per year, $\$8138 \times 12 = 97656$
Tara Ehlers, 218 days per year, $\$3911 \times 12 = 46932$
Brett Housman, 181 days per year, $\$3026 \times 12 = 36312$
Jason Bross, 121 days per year, $\$4977 \times 12 = 59724$
Emily Dryier, 120 days per year, $\$844 \times 12 = 10128$

Monthly salary and benefits: \$28,966

2. Payroll and administrative fees: \$1,448 monthly
3. Space provision: \$1,797 monthly

2017 PDA/Vista
Service Agreement

An updated agreement signed in 2019 increased the amount of time the designated PDA employees were expected to do work for Vista.³³

IV. Payment

A. **Amount of Compensation.** As compensation for the services to be rendered under this Agreement, Vista Learning shall pay PDA the following monthly amounts by the first day of each month beginning after the Effective Date, allocated based on the following staffing assumptions and as the parties may periodically update by mutual agreement:

1. Staffing costs Monthly
Joel Rogers, 90% Vista, \$7822
Steven Scranton, 90% Vista, \$7880
Tara Ehlers, 90% Vista, \$4330
Brett Housman, 75% Vista, \$3314
Jason Bross, 50% Vista, \$4835
Megan Shea, 100% Vista, \$4944
Monthly staffing total: \$33,127

2. Payroll and administrative fees: \$1,656 monthly
3. Space provision: \$1,797 monthly

2019 PDA/Vista
Service Agreement

³³ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CamScanner-09-13-2023-12.42.pdf>

Amendments signed in 2022 and 2023 reflected similar levels of PDA employee staffing dedicated to Vista.^{34 35}

IV. Payment

A. **Amount of Compensation.** As compensation for the services to be rendered under this Agreement, Vista Learning shall pay PDA the following monthly amounts by the first day of each month beginning after the Effective Date, allocated based on the following staffing assumptions and as the parties may periodically update by mutual agreement:

1. Staffing costs Monthly
 - Joel Rogers, 90% Vista, \$8206
 - Steven Scranton, 90% Vista, \$8206
 - Tara Ehlers, 90% Vista, \$4669
 - Brett Housman, 75% Vista, \$3647
 - Jason Bross, 50% Vista, \$5030
 - Megan Shea, 100% Vista, \$5332
 - Monthly staffing total: \$35,090
2. Payroll and administrative fees: \$1,738 monthly
3. Space provision: \$1,296 monthly

2022 PDA/Vista
Service Agreement

A. **Amount of Compensation.** As compensation for the services to be rendered under this Agreement, Vista Learning shall pay PDA the following monthly amounts by the first day of each month beginning after the Effective Date, allocated based on the following staffing assumptions and as the parties may periodically update by mutual agreement:

1. Staffing costs Monthly
 - Joel Rogers, 90% Vista, \$8103
 - Steven Scranton, 90% Vista, \$8103
 - Tara Ehlers, 90% Vista, \$4669
 - Brett Housman, 75% Vista, \$3634
 - Jason Bross, 50% Vista, \$4973
 - Megan Shea, 100% Vista, \$5279
 - FY 2024 Salary Increase, 100% Vista - \$3,755.69
 - Monthly staffing total: \$38,516.69
2. Payroll and administrative fees: \$1,738 monthly
3. Space provision: \$1,309.55 monthly

2023 PDA/Vista
Service Agreement

³⁴ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Revised-Service-Agreement-Vista-and-PDA-5-4-22.pdf>

³⁵ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Revised-Service-Agreement-Vista-PDA-5-4-2023.pdf>

The staffing costs in the PDA/Vista agreements do not appear to be equal to the actual wages paid to the employee.³⁶ For example, Bross was paid approximately \$450,000 by the PDA between 2017 and 2022; during this period Vista paid the PDA more than \$350,000 for an agreed 50% of his time.

The Public Employee Benefits

Ultimately, since at least 2013, individuals doing work for Vista were “employed” by the PDA, making them eligible for state pension benefits, as well as public health care benefits.

In available versions of the since-amended 1995 intergovernmental agreement, PDA employees were intended to be eligible to participate in the Illinois Teachers’ Retirement System and/or the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (IMRF).³⁷ The PDA board of governors (reporting only two members at the time) also passed a resolution in July 1996 to enable it to apply to participate in the IMRF.^{38 39}

PERSONNEL:

Personnel employed by PDA shall be employees of the PDA; said personnel are not employees of county government. To the extent allowable under law, rule and regulation governing the Illinois Teachers’ Retirement System, eligible employees shall be entitled to participate in Illinois Teachers’ Retirement System.

IMRF PARTICIPATION:

The parties intend that this Intergovernmental Agreement be considered a participating IMRF employer with respect to any of its employees who qualify for membership in IMRF. The PDA shall be responsible for and shall make those contributions required by the Pension Code on behalf of employees who are IMRF participants. In the event that the PDA dissolves or otherwise terminates, its IMRF contributions shall be allocated between the Will ROE and the Grundy Kendall ROE on the following percentage basis: 70% Will ROE, 30% Grundy Kendall ROE.

The PDA is currently listed as an IMRF-eligible employer on the IMRF website.⁴⁰

³⁶ <https://www.openthebooks.com/members/employer-detail/?Id=70873&tab=1>

³⁷ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PDA-K-G-ROE-ROE-Intergovernmental-Agreement.pdf>

³⁸ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Resolution-for-Participation-6357-1.pdf>

³⁹ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/7-26-96-Minutes.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://www.imrf.org/en/about-imrf/transparency/imrf-employers-search>

Since at least 2017, Linksman has received a monthly annuity of between \$10,000 and \$12,000 from the Illinois Teachers' Retirement System through his employment with the PDA, according to public state pension records.⁴¹ Meanwhile, in its 2019 tax disclosure statement, Vista reported Linksman worked 20 hours per week for the organization, earning approximately \$30,000 annually.⁴² Vista reported no compensation for him in previous or subsequent years.

The Vista contractors employed by the PDA (as outlined in the service agreements) do not appear in payroll databases for the State of Illinois⁴³ or Will County.⁴⁴ They are found, however, in public records data sourced from IMRF.⁴⁵ The wages paid to the Vista-contracted employees from 2017 to 2022 total \$1.9 million – just over 50 percent of the PDA's total wages paid in this period, and seven of the nineteen employees are Vista contractors.

Wages Paid 2017-2022			
PDA Employees Who Worked as Vista Contractors	Jason E Bross	\$451,716.50	Total: \$1,912,812.40
	Emily Dryier	\$20,258.00	
	Tara L Ehlers	\$286,066.18	
	Brett M Housman	\$227,382.96	
	Joel M Rogers	\$393,084.94	
	Steven R Scranton	\$396,803.84	
	Megan Shea	\$137,499.98	
Dedicated PDA Employees	Susan M Blaine	\$1,205.12	Total: \$1,807,738.64
	Hallie Brenzewski	\$421,534.01	
	Deanna M Chapman	\$135,525.35	
	Mary Chignoli	\$421,534.01	
	Kimberly S Elleby	\$13,149.98	
	Michelle Gannon	\$30,952.40	
	Agime Jusufi	\$25,113.43	
	Henry J Kopeika	\$347,040.70	
	Alexia M Lopez	\$103,506.81	
	Maria M Martinez	\$10,999.98	
	Deann L Wheeler	\$22,866.11	
	Terese H Wills	\$274,310.74	

⁴¹ <https://www.openthebooks.com/members/employer-detail/?Id=70873>

⁴² <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/202031479349300233/full>

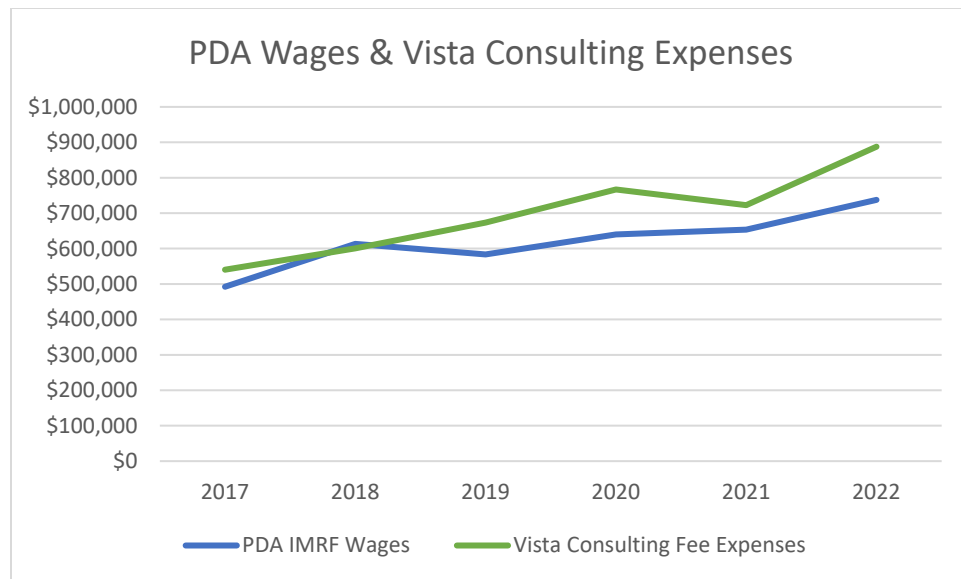
⁴³ <https://illinoiscomptroller.gov/financial-reports-data/data-sets-portals/salary-database>

⁴⁴ <https://openpayrolls.com/county/will-county-il>

⁴⁵ <https://www.openthebooks.com/members/employer-detail/?Id=70873&tab=1>

This proportion of contractor/employee salaries continues: in the PDA's proposed budget for 2024, the agency expects to pay \$1.1 million in salaries (plus more than \$450,000 in benefits, including \$66,000 for IMRF/Teachers' Retirement Fund); it forecasts receiving \$499,000 from Vista.⁴⁶

Obviously, the IMRF data shows the PDA's wages amounts closely correlate with the "consulting" expenses Vista reported in federal tax disclosure forms:



According to *Illinois Leaks/Edgar County Watchdogs*, Vista also paid nearly \$875,000 in bonuses to six PDA employees between 2017 and 2023:⁴⁷

- Joel Rogers – \$170,120.39
- Steven Scranton – \$171,305.21
- Tara Ehlers – \$163,724.98
- Brett Housman – \$126,231.45
- Jason Bross – \$170,414.39
- Megan Shae – \$70,071.98 (since 2020)
- Emily Dryier – \$2,872.19 (for 2017 and 2018 only)

⁴⁶ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/pda-proposed-budget-fy24.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/2023/11/874000-in-improper-gifts-from-contractor-to-ro-e-pda-employees/>
The outlet obtained this information through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The Apparent Coverup

The Proposed Dissolution

On November 2, 2023, the PDA held a public board meeting.^{48 49} At the meeting, Grundy/Kendall County ROE Superintendent Chris Mehochko stated that he had been in discussions for years about dissolving the PDA by the end of June 2024 (according to the PDA intergovernmental agreement, in order for the PDA to be disbanded, notice would have to be given before January 1st, and it could not be disbanded before June 2024). However, it seems unlikely that this was previously planned, as the PDA had already put together a 2024 proposed budget, which included forecasted revenue and expenses for the entire year.⁵⁰ In addition, the PDA and Vista had signed an amended service agreement in May 2023, which also included provisions for salary increases in 2024.⁵¹

Currently, the only board meeting minutes available on the PDA website are from its July 21, 2023, meeting.⁵² There was no discussion of dissolving the PDA documented.

The Employee Resignations

As noted earlier in this report, PDA employees have publicly stated that they also work for Vista. However, since October 2023 – when *Illinois Leaks/Edgar County Watchdog* published the first in its series on the PDA and Vista – many of these individuals have begun to distance themselves from their reported overlapping employment.

Brett Housman, a “technology support specialist” for the PDA and Vista, reports on his LinkedIn profile that he departed the PDA in October 2023 and began working at Vista in November.^{53 54} The PDA paid him more than \$225,000 from 2017 to 2022 – while he was contracted to spend 75% of his time working for Vista.

⁴⁸ The public agenda is available on the PDA’s website:

https://www.pdaonline.org/application/files/5816/9871/4045/11.2.2023_PDA_Agenda.pdf

⁴⁹ A video of the meeting is available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/NaMAMhmMC34?si=XBmpw3Nrv-NoRaJH>

⁵⁰ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/pda-proposed-budget-fy24.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Revised-Service-Agreement-Vista-PDA-5-4-2023.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.pdaonline.org/application/files/9416/9530/2584/scan0002.pdf>

⁵³ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/brett-housman>

⁵⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/brett-housman-91535a60/>

Brett Housman

Technology Support Specialist



With a degree in computer science, Brett Housman started his job in the field with The Professional Development Alliance as a consultant doing part time work for the Regional Offices of Education for Will, Kendall, and Grundy counties and the PDA office. That soon turned to full time contractor and he is now stationed at the PDA office doing on-site tech support for the staff and workshop guests.

Brett handles software and hardware support issues and works closely with the IT Network Administrator Jason Bross to help keep the PDA, Vista Learning and Vista's software EvaluWise moving smoothly.

He also works within the Vista Learning not for profit entity supporting users of the teacher evaluation software, EvaluWise. Vista Learning also hosts the Computers 2 Kids program that gifts donated, refurbished computers to students from schools in Will, Kendall, and Grundy counties. Brett helps prepare the computers and giveaway ceremonies for this wonderful program.

Brett Housman PDA bio



Brett Housman

Information Technology and Support

Experience



Information Technology/Client Relations

VISTA LEARNING NFP · Full-time

Nov 2023 - Present · 2 mos

Joliet, Illinois, United States

Information Technology for Regional Offices of Education for Will, Kendall and Grundy counties of Illinois as well as the main campus for Professional Development Alliance.

Refurbish computers to donate to local kids.

Client relations and support for in-house developed software for teacher evaluation - EvaluWise.



Information Technology & Client Support

Professional Development Alliance · Full-time

Nov 2016 - Oct 2023 · 7 yrs

Joliet, IL

Information Technology for Regional Offices of Education for Will, Kendall and Grundy counties of Illinois as well as the main campus for Professional Development Alliance.

- Hardware and software support mainly revolving around Windows and Microsoft Server
- Refurbished around 300 since 2014 to donate to local less fortunate children
 - o Prepared computers through imaging, cloning and initial Windows setup
- On-site and remote monitoring and maintenance services as a managed services provider to local school districts
- Manage client email hosting through Windows Exchange Console
- Client setup and management with in-house developed software for teacher evaluation
 - o Client relations
 - o Data entry, user upload
 - o Map software to mimic school districts teacher evaluation plans
 - o Work with development team and client to meet client needs through building custom calculations, feature requests and data entry
- G Suite configuration and management
 - o App deployment/management
 - o User management
- Office 365 admin management
 - o User management



Information Technology/Client Relations

VISTA LEARNING NFP · Full-time

Nov 2023 - Present · 2 mos

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Information Technology & Client Support

Professional Development Alliance · Full-time

Nov 2016 - Oct 2023 · 7 yrs

Joliet, IL

Brett Housman LinkedIn profile

Joel Rogers, project manager/technology specialist for the PDA now reports he is a senior manager with EvaluWise.⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ The PDA paid him nearly \$400,000 from 2017 to 2022, while he was contracted to spend 90% of his time with Vista.

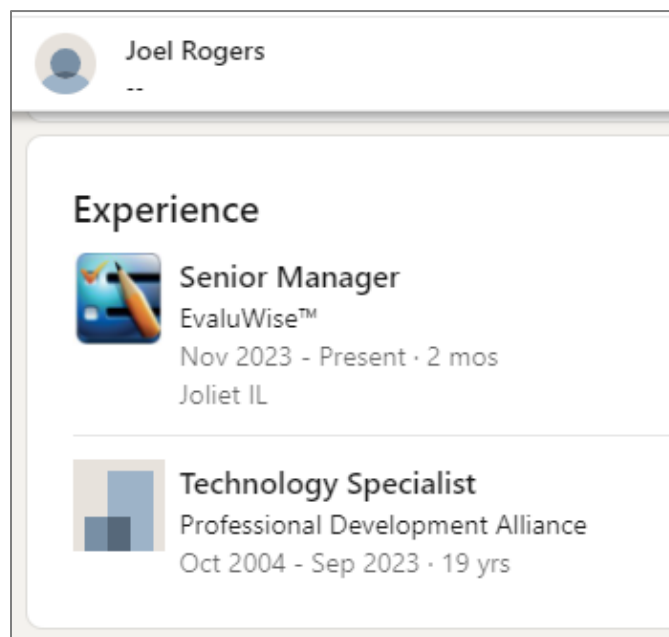
Joel Rogers

Project Manager/Technology Specialist

Joel serves as the Technology Specialist for the Professional Development Alliance. Joel has worked in the education/technology field since 2001, including time with K-12 and higher education. Joel has been with the Professional Development Alliance since 2004. Joel helps manage the technology and networking at the Professional Development Alliance as well as the Will, Grundy, and Kendall Regional Offices of Education. Joel also acts as a project manager and lead on special technology projects including EvaluWise and Vista Learning's Computers 2 Kids program.

Joel's Educational background includes a Bachelor of Science Degree in Telecommunications and Networking from Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

Joel Rogers PDA website bio



Joel Rogers LinkedIn profile

⁵⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joel-rogers-08a94946/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/joel-rogers>

Steven Scranton, a PDA web developer for more than 20 years, now reports he is a senior developer for Vista, although his LinkedIn profile also notes that he has worked on EvaluWise since 2012.⁵⁷ ⁵⁸ The PDA paid him nearly \$400,000 from 2017 to 2022, while for most of this period, he was contracted to spend 90% of his time on work for Vista.


Steven Scranton

Web Developer

Steven is the web developer for the Professional Development Alliance. He maintains the websites for the PDA as well as sites for various programs and conferences throughout the year. Steven is also the developer of the online registration system for an integrated data management system.


Steven's educational background includes a Bachelor of Applied Science in Web Design & Multimedia from Westwood College.

Steven Scranton PDA website bio




Steven Scranton
Senior Developer

Experience




Senior Developer
VISTA LEARNING NFP · Full-time
Nov 2023 - Present · 2 mos
Plainfield, Illinois, United States · On-site



Web Developer
Professional Development Alliance · Full-time
May 2001 - Sep 2023 · 22 yrs 5 mos
Joliet, Illinois, United States · On-site

Projects

EvaluWise - Teacher Evaluation
May 2012 - Present
[Show project](#) 

Teacher evaluation tool for help school and districts evaluate their teachers using any rubric or framework.

Steven Scranton LinkedIn profile

⁵⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/steven-scranton-001b6874/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/steven-scranton>

Tara Ehlers, a PDA technology specialist, reports that she left the PDA in August 2023 and now works full-time for EvaluWise.^{59 60} In her LinkedIn profile, she also states that she has worked for EvaluWise since 2014 – concurrent with her PDA employment. The PDA paid her more than \$280,000 from 2017 to 2022, while for most of this period she was contracted to spend 90% of her time on work for Vista.

Tara Ehlers

Technology Specialist




Tara Ehlers responsibilities include End User Customer support for both staff and guest at the PDA, provides Technical Support for online trainings offered through the PDA and creates and updates promotional flyers for workshops.

She also works within the Vista Learning not for profit entity supporting users of the teacher evaluation software, Vista Learning also hosts the Computers 2 Kids and scholarship programs that provides refurbished laptops to students from schools in Will, Kendall, and Grundy counties. Tara works closely with organizing the giveaway ceremonies and managing the program.

Tara has over 15 years of experience in Customer/End User Support. She has experience working with end users in an IT and customer support capacity in several different fields which include education, software and not for profit.


Tara earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Lewis University.

Tara Ehlers PDA website bio




Tara Ehlers
Implantation Specialist at EvaluWise™

Experience



Implementation Specialist
EvaluWise™ · Full-time
Oct 2014 - Present · 9 yrs 3 mos
Joliet, Illinois, United States

Operations/Support Manager



Technical Support Specialist
Professional Development Alliance
Oct 2014 - Aug 2023 · 8 yrs 11 mos

Tara Ehlers LinkedIn profile

⁵⁹ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tara-ehlers-abb86416/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/tara-ehlers>

On the PDA's public agenda for its September 21, 2023, meeting, it included discussion of the possible resignation of the seven Vista-contracted employees.⁶¹ The PDA has not published the meeting minutes, to date.

A-24-015 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Joel Rogers

A-24-016 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Jason Bross

A-24-017 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Steven Scranton

A-24-018 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Tara Ehlers

A-24-019 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Brett Housman

A-24-020 Formal discussion of, and possible acceptance of, resignation of Megan Shea

Approximately a week after this meeting, on October 1, Vista and the Grundy/Kendall ROE signed a service agreement virtually identical to the contract Vista had with the PDA.⁶² The Grundy/Kendall ROE agreed to administer payroll for the same six employees previously working for Vista through the PDA, as shown in the excerpt below.

Effective October 1, 2023, Vista Learning will pay to GK ROE for services, including salary, benefits, and administrative fees as specified below.

Amount of Compensation. As compensation for the services to be rendered under this Agreement, Vista Learning shall pay GK ROE the following monthly amounts by the first day of each month beginning after the Effective Date, allocated based on the following staffing and as the parties may periodically update by mutual agreement:

1. Staffing costs Monthly (salary and benefits):
Joel Rogers, 100% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning
Steven Scranton, 100% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning
Tara Ehlers, 100% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning
Brett Housman, 75% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning
Jason Bross, 75% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning
Megan Shea, 100% of salary and benefits paid by Vista Learning

Monthly staffing total (salaries): \$33,429.00
Monthly staffing total (insurance): \$9,018.33

2. Payroll and administrative fees: \$1,500.00

⁶¹ <https://www.pdaonline.org/application/files/8216/9530/2583/scan0001.pdf>

⁶² <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Kendal-Vista-Agreement-signed-October-1-2023.pdf>

The Employee Transfers

Following the PDA's most recent board meeting, which occurred on November 2nd, *Illinois Leaks/Edgar County Watchdog* reported that Grundy/Kendall County ROE Superintendent Chris Mehochko stated that this contract had been canceled by Vista Learning at the end of October, and that the PDA/ROE/Vista employees resigned from the Grundy/Kendall County ROE at the same time.⁶³

None of these newly employed contractors report in their online professional biographies/profiles that they are employed by the Grundy/Kendall ROE – in identified profiles (as noted earlier in this report), the employees state they are employed by Vista or EvaluWise.

In addition, on October 28, 2023, Vista Learning's website domain moved from an IP address associated with the PDA to an outside host.

The Unannounced Board Changes

Vista updated its website sometime after June 10, 2023, removing Shawn Walsh and Chris Mehochko from its list of board members.⁶⁴ The two were replaced by Dr. Diane Cepela, a retired school superintendent.

(next page)

⁶³ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/2023/11/will-grundy-kendall-roes-part-4-public-meeting-pda-dissolution-and-contract-cancelation/>

⁶⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230610142441/https://vistalearning.org/about-us/board-members>

Board Members

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[News](#)

Honorable Chris Mehochko

President / Treasurer

Regional Superintendent of Grundy/Kendall
Counties

Patti Furlano

Vice President

Education Consultant

Jay Linksman

Executive Director / Secretary

Executive Director of the Professional Development
Alliance

Paul Nordstrom

Board Member

Retired Regional Superintendent

Shawn Walsh

Board Member

Regional Superintendent of Will County

Larry Wiers

Board Member

Retired School Superintendent

Board Members

Patti Furlano

President / Treasurer

Education Consultant

Jay Linksman

Executive Director / Secretary

Executive Director of Vista Learning

Dr. Diane Cepela

Board Member

Retired School Superintendent

Paul Nordstrom

Board Member

Retired Regional Superintendent

Larry Wiers

Board Member

Retired School Superintendent

Vista Learning website (June 10, 2023)

Vista Learning website (current)

THE PDA AND VISTA'S PRIVATE VENTURES WITH PUBLIC RESOURCES

While on PDA property, using PDA employees and resources, Vista engaged in multiple business activities outside of its stated mission. While the PDA/Vista service agreements included amounts to be paid by Vista for occupancy, and payroll and administrative fees, it is extremely questionable whether the PDA should be providing such services to a private business enterprise.

In addition to the largely profitable EvaluWise software development, as noted earlier in this report, early versions of the organization's website advertised technical installation/support services:



Screenshot of vistalearning.org (September 22, 2006)

Technical Services

Get the most from your technology. Having access to the right technology can improve any organization by:

- Increasing productivity from your employees
- Improving learning and retention from your students
- Providing a quality experience for your clients and customers

However, for technology to have any impact, it must be the right technology - and it has to work when it's needed. Vista Learning Technology Services offers several options for helping you to assess your needs, purchase the equipment that meets those needs, install the equipment and software, and keep it all in top shape. Our goal is to help your organization to be the best that it can be.

Workstation Support Contracts (WSC)

This support contract entitles maintenance, repair, and troubleshooting of any workstations under this contract. Replacement parts/hardware are not included. Technician will begin remote repairs or be dispatched onsite within 24 hours of incident being reported. Cost of contract is approximately \$15.00 per month per workstation depending on age and condition of workstation.

Server Support Contract (SSC)

This support contract entitles maintenance, repair, and troubleshooting of any Server under this contract. Replacement parts/hardware are not included. Technician will begin remote repairs or be dispatched onsite within 24 hours of incident being reported. Cost of contract is approximately \$100.00 per month per server depending on age and condition of server.

Onsite Technology Audit (OTA)

Technician will come to your site do a full walkthrough and inspect the following equipment (Routers, Firewalls, Switches, Servers, Workstation, and Wireless technologies). Technician will provide security and upgrade recommendations. Cost for this service is \$75.00 per hour. (NOTE: If you are a school located in Will, Grundy, or Kendall counties this service may be provided for free through your LTC please call for more info.)

Pricing		
	Per Server / Workstation	Per Hour
WSC	\$15 / Month	N/A
SSC	\$100 / Month	N/A
OTA	N/A	\$75
NSA	N/A	\$75
FI	N/A	\$80
SI	N/A	\$80
WI	N/A	\$50
NCI	N/A	Call
WNI	N/A	\$80

Vista Learning's Technical Services page, archived December 31, 2007⁶⁵

Vista reported in 2014 (the earliest available tax disclosure year) that its revenue came from these services, in addition to the EvaluWise software:⁶⁶

Program Service Revenue		Business Code	
2a	EVALUWISE SOFTWARE		187,211
b	REMOTE MANAGEMENT		31,637
c	TECHNICAL SUPPORT/ WEB DESIGN		27,960
d	WEB, EMAIL HOSTING & SPAM		21,827
e			
f	All other program service revenue.		
g	Total. Add lines 2a-2f	268,635	

Vista Learning, 2014 Form 990

⁶⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20071231143300/http://www.vistalearning.org/Services/TechServices.htm>

⁶⁶ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201521329349301392/full>

Vista's disclosures in subsequent years report all program service revenue as "Technical Support/Web Design," and do not break out the various services. However, the organization continued to offer "IT solutions" for years:

Vista Learning

Home Services Computers 2 Kids About Us Keyword...

IT Solutions That Work For Your Organization

Remote Maintenance & Monitoring

Peace of mind knowing you're protected 24/7

Benefits of Computer Maintenance Services

- ✓ Minimizes Downtime
- ✓ Reduces Security Threats
- ✓ Provides Real-time Problem Monitoring & Error Correction
- ✓ Improves Network Performance and Stability
- ✓ Automates Critical System Updates & Patching
- ✓ Automated Health Check Reports Daily, Weekly, Monthly

[Learn More](#)

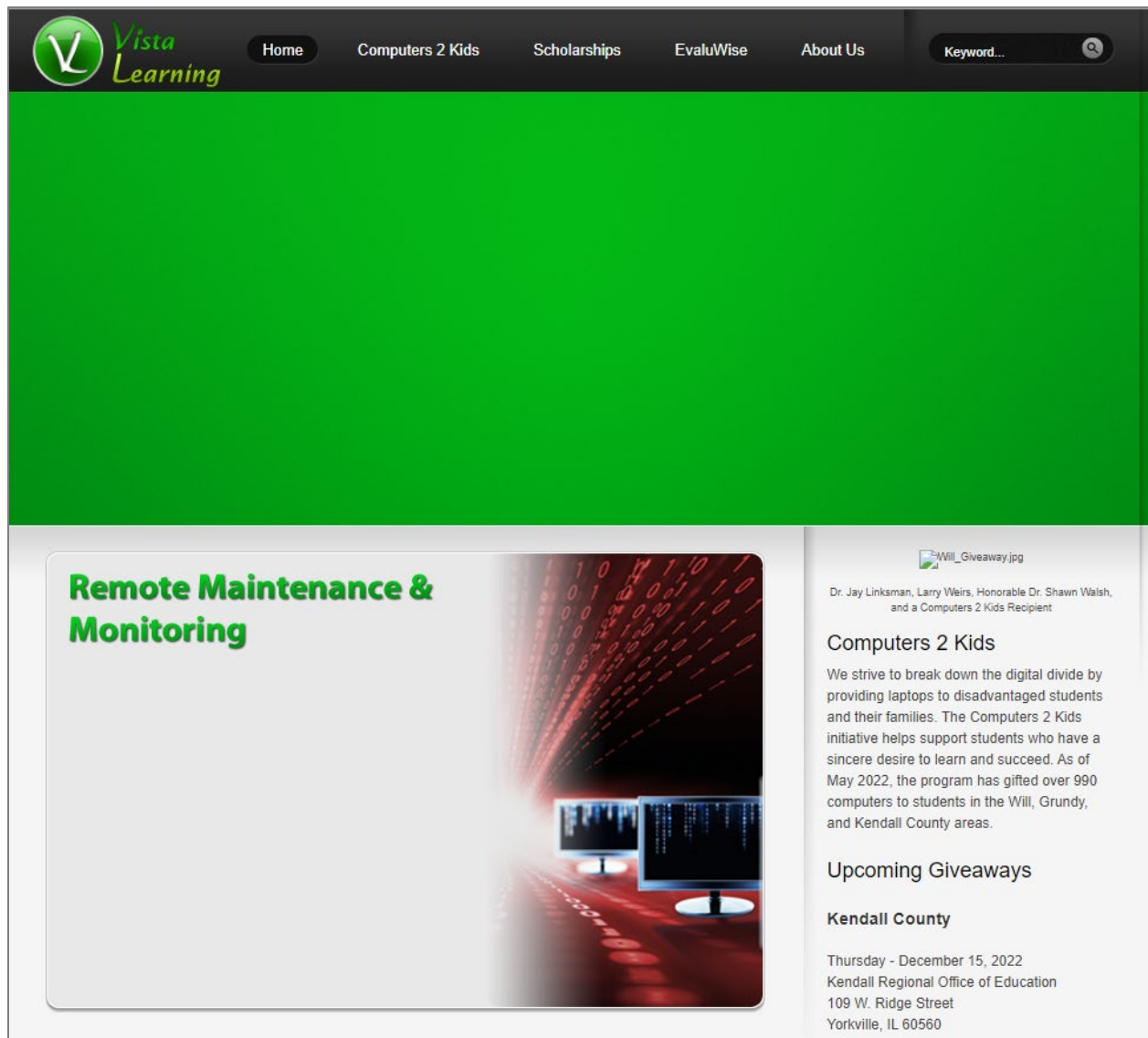
Serving Chicago and surrounding areas with affordable computer services.

Computers 2 Kids

We strive to break down the digital divide by providing computers to disadvantaged students and their families. The Computers 2 Kids initiative helps support students who have a sincere desire to learn and succeed. As of May 2017, the program

Dr. Jay Linksman, Larry Weirs, Honorable Dr. Shawn Walsh, and a 2016 Computers 2 Kids Recipient

Vista Learning website, November 14, 2017



Vista Learning website, January 31, 2023

Website domain registration records show that Jason Bross, as an employee of the PDA, served as registrant or administrator of several websites, most of which appear to be related to either Vista or a school administrative body:

- area1liaisons.org
- computers2kidsinneed.org
- evaluwise.com
- evaluwise.org
- fsd89.org
- kcsec.org
- laraway70c.org
- sac-success.com
- sac-success.org
- sacsuccess.com
- sacsuccess.org
- schoolimprovementcoach.com
- schoolimprovementcoach.org
- schoolimprovementcoach.org

- manhattan114.org
- pdaonline.org
- readinginstruction.com
- resprodata.org
- taft90.org
- vistalearning.org
- willroe.info
- willroe.net
- willroe.org

Since May 2023, Vista has been the registrant and administrative contact for the website domain readinginstruction.com, which is affiliated with a business owned by Ricki Linksman, wife of Jay Linksman.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸The registrant email address provided, notably, points to Jason Bross at the PDA.

```
Domain Name: READINGINSTRUCTION.COM
Registry Domain ID: 13223899_DOMAIN_COM-VRSN
Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.networksolutions.com
Registrar URL: http://networksolutions.com
Updated Date: 2022-10-12T19:31:34Z
Creation Date: 1999-11-15T21:02:47Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2025-11-15T21:02:46Z
Registrar: Network Solutions, LLC
Registrar IANA ID: 2
```

```
Registry Registrant ID:
Registrant Name: Vista Learning, NFP
Registrant Organization: Vista Learning, NFP
Registrant Street: 2705 MCDONOUGH ST
Registrant City: JOLIET
Registrant State/Province: IL
Registrant Postal Code: 60436-9701
Registrant Country: US
Registrant Phone: +1.8159548334
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax:
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email: jbross@pdaonline.org
```

Website domain registration for readinginstruction.com

During most of this period, Vista's contracted work was limited to the development and support of EvaluWise, as set out in the initial PDA/Vista contract signed in 2013.⁶⁹ Available records, including the website archives and tax disclosure forms described above, indicate that PDA employees contracted by Vista performed work outside this agreement. For example, Jason Bross

⁶⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ricki-linksman-b17710b/>

⁶⁸ An archived version of the now-defunct website can be viewed at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200109230941/http://www.readinginstruction.com/>

⁶⁹ https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PDA_Vista-6-1-2013.pdf

provided a PDA email address, not a Vista email, when registering websites, including the Vista website he registered in 2004. The PDA/Vista 2017 service agreement broadened the scope of work – making no mention of EvaluWise. The new agreement also allowed for the PDA to perform services for other parties – provided that its work for Vista took priority.⁷⁰

D. Other Employment. PDA may engage in other business and perform services for other persons for Contractor’s own account, provided that such business or performance of services does not interfere with Contractor’s obligation to render timely and competent services to Vista Learning pursuant to this Agreement.

2017 PDA/Vista Service Agreement

The Majestic Isle Casino

Internal emails confirm that PDA employees and PDA servers were used to benefit at least one for-profit private business.^{71 72} These emails, which date to 2014 and 2015, show that Vista provided email hosting services to The Majestic Isle Casino (“The Mic”).^{73 74 75} The email hosting services were provided via a PDA server. In the 2014 and 2015 internal emails, PDA employee Jason Bross (“Bross”) sent a Vista invoice for email hosting to The Mic’s operator, Derek Brenczewski (“Brenczewski”), who also happened to be the husband of a PDA employee, Hallie Brenczewski.^{76 77 78} The invoice covered a period dating back to July 2013, and related to email accounts for both The Mic’s domain (themic.com) and for another business affiliated with Brenczewski (graffle.com).

⁷⁰ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CamScanner-09-13-2023-12.42.pdf>

⁷¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20131207060629/http://vistalearning.org/services/email-account-hosting/>

⁷² <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/200709639/201521329349301392/full>

⁷³ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Jan-2014-invoice-email-to-MIC.jpg>

⁷⁴ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Feb-2015-email.jpg>

⁷⁵ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Jan-2014-invoice-to-MIC-graffle.jpg>

⁷⁶ <https://www.openthebooks.com/members/employer-detail/?Id=70873&tab=1>

⁷⁷ <https://www.pdaonline.org/about-us/staff/hallie-brenczewski>

⁷⁸ <https://patch.com/illinois/joliet/defunct-downtown-joliet-restaurant-the-department--owner-derek-brenczewski-owe-500k--interest-lawsuit>

FYI: Invoice Sent To Derek from PayPal

From: Jason Bross <jbross@pdaonline.org>
To: Jay Linksman <jlinksman@pdaonline.org>, Georgia Geske <ggeske@pdaonline.org>, Steven Scranton <sscranton@pdaonline.org>, Joel Rogers <jrogers@pdaonline.org>, Jason Bross <jbross@pdaonline.org>
Sent: January 27, 2014 3:13:24 AM CST
Received: January 27, 2014 3:13:32 AM CST
Attachments: Invoice to Derek for Services- PayPal.pdf

Hello Everyone and Good Morning

I have created and sent the following invoice to Derek through the VistaLearning PayPal account. I have attached a copy of the Invoice in PDF format to share with everyone.

Thank You and have a wonderful Morning.

Jason Bross

Network Administrator & Engineer

Regional Office of Education for Will, Grundy, Kendall Counties

Professional Development Alliance & VistaLearning, NFP

Learning Technology Center Area 1 South

Office: 815-744-8334

Cell: 815-954-8334

jbross@pdaonline.org

jbross@vistalearning.org

January 2014 email from Jason Bross to PDA/Vista colleagues

1/27/2014

Print Invoice - PayPal

**INVOICE****Vista Learning, NFP**

Billing Vista Learning
2705 McDonough St.
Joliet, IL 60438
United States

Phone: 815-725-5510
Fax: 815-744-8396
billing@vistalearning.org
www.vistalearning.org

Invoice number	0001
Invoice date	1/27/2014
Payment terms	Due on receipt
Due date	1/27/2014

Bill To

derek@themic.com

Description	Quantity	Unit price	Amount
"Graffle.com" Exchange E-Mail Account Hosting Service - 1 Year(07-01-2013-06/30/2014) E-Mail Account Hosting Service. Exchange Account Features: E-Mail, Calendar, Contacts, Tasks, Spam & Virus Filtering.	6	\$180.00	\$1,080.00
"TheMic.com" Exchange E-Mail Account Hosting Service - 1 Year(07-01-2013-06/30/2014) E-Mail Account Hosting Service. Exchange Account Features: E-Mail, Calendar, Contacts, Tasks, Spam & Virus Filtering.	4	\$180.00	\$720.00
"TheMic.com" POP E-Mail Account Hosting Service - 1 Year(07-01-2013-06/30/2014) E-Mail Account Hosting Basic POP Service.	14	\$60.00	\$840.00
Subtotal			\$2,640.00
Total			\$2,640.00 USD

Note to recipient

Hi Derek

This is Jason Bross we have both been so busy and haven't had a chance to catch-up with the latest in our lives. We should schedule a time for a Skype meeting with you and Hallie to catch up on the latest. I'm sure your boys are growing up quick just like my boys. Well anyways I need you to pay this as soon as possible. I thought Pay Pal Invoice may make things easier for you. Thank You Derek and I wish the best of things for you and your family every day.

January 2014 invoice sent from Vista to Derek Brenczewski (The Mic)

Fwd: Payment

From: Jason Bross <jason.jbross@gmail.com>
To: Jason Bross <jbross@pdaonline.org>
Sent: February 10, 2015 9:01:46 AM CST
Received: February 10, 2015 9:01:48 AM CST

Sent from my iPhone

Jason Bross

Network Administrator & Engineer

Cell # 815-954-8334

Begin forwarded message:

From: Derek Brenczewski <derek@themic.com>
Date: January 12, 2015 at 3:18:11 PM CST
To: Jason Bross <jason.jbross@gmail.com>
Subject: Payment

Jason, after all of the fucking bullshit that I have been going through in Antigua I finally got a wire in to pay some bills. Can you send me an an invoice of the current outstanding Midas bill?

Derek Brenczewski

*January/February 2015 emails between Brenczewski and Bross
(at Bross' personal and PDA email addresses)*

Brenczewski and a group of investors reportedly purchased The MIC, then a defunct casino, for \$15 million in 2013.⁷⁹ ⁸⁰ Brenczewski was put in charge of efforts to re-open the casino, which was filmed for a Spike TV reality show, "Trouble in Paradise."⁸¹ ⁸² The casino appears to have closed again within a year.⁸³ According to his LinkedIn profile, Brenczewski is now a self-employed "Crypto Currency Mining Strategist."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ <https://www.newspapers.com/image/182216401/>

⁸⁰ <https://patch.com/illinois/joliet/joliet-takes-tropics-local-business-owners-antigua-adventure-coming-tv-near-you-0>

⁸¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8NwzrRAVPg>

⁸² <https://www.newspapers.com/image/897327381/>

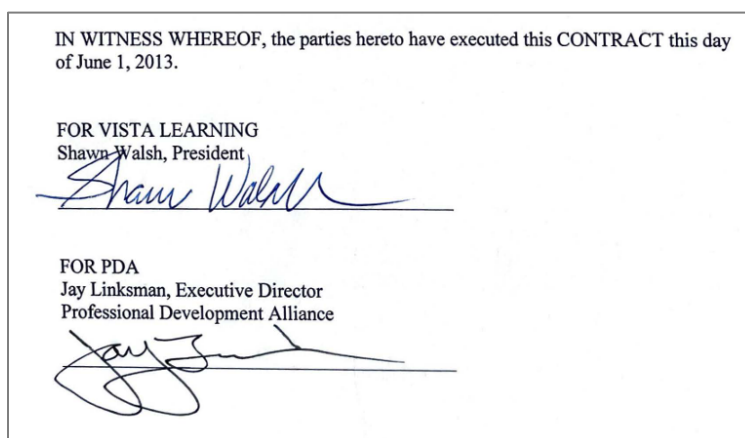
⁸³ http://chipguide.themogh.org/cg_state2.php?id=AH

⁸⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/derekbrenczewski/>

POTENTIAL VIOLATIONS OF THE LAW

In 2019, Vista requested its outside counsel – Wagenmaker & Oberly – provide a legal opinion on “retirement plan participation eligibility for people who perform extensive work for Vista Learning but are employees of Professional Development Alliance.”⁸⁵ The attorney wrote that the arrangement appeared proper under IMRF guidance, and that there was no requirement that would necessitate the PDA employees perform any “specific or substantial” work for the PDA outside of the contracted work for Vista. However, the IMRF surely never intended for 90% or 100% of the 600 or 1,000 annual “performance of duty” hours required for an employee to be eligible,⁸⁶ would be performed in service of a private venture. Similarly, it seems highly unlikely that the IMRF ever anticipated that the reported “public employee” wages from eligible employers would actually be paid by a private company. This begs the question: why would the PDA even have these employees with wages paid by an outside agency unless the goal was to garner inappropriate pension benefits?

The overlapping governance of the PDA and Vista resulted in public officers (ROE Superintendents) leading the board of a private company whose business stood to benefit those public officers. This runs afoul of the prohibited interest in contracts section of the Public Officer Prohibited Activities Act (50 ILCS 105/3).⁸⁷ The law prohibits any public office holder from representing any other party in a contract with the government. However, at least one ROE Superintendent – at the time also president of the Vista board – signed a contract between the PDA and Vista. In 2013, Walsh signed the first PDA/Vista contract to develop EvaluWise:^{88 89}



⁸⁵ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CamScanner-09-13-2023-12.50.pdf>

⁸⁶ https://www.imrf.org/AManual/online_AA_Manual/3.65_a.htm

⁸⁷ <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ILCS/ilcs3.asp?ActID=689&ChapterID=11>

⁸⁸ https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PDA_Vista-6-1-2013.pdf

⁸⁹ In subsequent agreements, Linksman signed on behalf of Vista.

According to data obtained by the *Illinois Leaks/Edgar County Watchdog*, between 2017 and 2023, Vista paid nearly \$875,000 in bonuses to the six PDA employees contracted to do work for Vista.⁹⁰ This violates the gift ban section of the State Officials and Employees Ethics Acts (5 ILCS 430/10-10), which forbids employees from accepting gifts from any entity that does business or seeks to do business with the employee or their employer.⁹¹ ⁹² The 1996 PDA intergovernmental agreement also explicitly prohibits PDA employees “directly involved in program planning, recommendations, advisory groups, and/or cadres shall not be paid consultation or presentation fees by PDA for services rendered during their regular contracted time.”⁹³

As discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report, PDA employees contracted to Vista also used government resources to benefit private businesses. The most striking example is found in PDA employee Jason Bross’ emails with and about Derek Brenczewski (husband of PDA employee Hallie Brenczewski) and The Majestic Isle Casino. Bross, using his PDA email address, communicated with Brenczewski about email hosting services provided by Vista. These emails included one in which Bross sent an invoice to Brenczewski (on Vista letterhead) from his PDA email address, and a related email Bross sent to his PDA/Vista colleagues at their PDA email addresses about the invoice. Most importantly, the servers hosting the email exchanges were owned by the PDA. This likely violates the Illinois State Constitution, which limits the use of public funds, property, and credit to public purposes only.⁹⁴

The PDA has also likely violated provisions set out in the 1996 intergovernmental agreement (“IGA”) that created the agency.⁹⁵ According to the IGA, the PDA was to provide professional development services to the school districts of Will, Grundy, and Kendall counties. Although the IGA allowed for certain related activities like “training, technical assistance, coordination and planning,” and other services upon the request and support of school districts, nowhere in the agreement is there a provision for the PDA to develop software for sale, to contract out its own employees, or to provide PDA resources to a private business.

⁹⁰ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/2023/11/874000-in-improper-gifts-from-contractor-to-roe-pda-employees/>

⁹¹ <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs5.asp?ActID=2529&ChapterID=2>

⁹² Although the PDA employees are not “state employees,” the Act also requires all government entities to adopt an ordinance or resolution no less restrictive than the state law. (5 ILCS 430/70-5)

⁹³ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PDA-K-G-ROE-ROE-Intergovernmental-Agreement.pdf>

⁹⁴ <https://www.ilga.gov/commission/lrb/con8.htm>

⁹⁵ <https://edgarcountywatchdogs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PDA-K-G-ROE-ROE-Intergovernmental-Agreement.pdf>

APPENDIX A – EXHIBITS

1. Vista Learning, NFP: 2014 - 2023 Form 990 tax disclosure forms
2. Vista Learning, NFP: 2004 - 2023 annual reports filed with the Illinois Secretary of State

APPENDIX B – VISTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS (2004 – 2023)

Vista Learning NFP Board of Directors

Legend:

Will County ROE Supt.

Grundy/Kendall
ROE Supt.

Annual Report Year	President	Secretary	Vice President	Treasurer	Director	Director	Director	Director
2004					Richard Duran	Thomas Centowski	Jay Linksman	Paul Swanstrom
2005	Richard Duran	Jay Linksman	Thomas Centowski	Richard Duran	Paul Swanstrom			
2006	Richard Duran	Jay Linksman	Thomas Centowski	Richard Duran	Paul Swanstrom			
2007	Richard Duran	Jay Linksman	Thomas Centowski	Richard Duran	Paul Swanstrom			
2008	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran		
2009	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran		
2010	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran	Larry Wiers	
2011	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran	Larry Wiers	
2012	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran	Larry Wiers	
2013	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Jay Linksman	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Swanstrom	Richard Duran	Larry Wiers	Jay Linksman
2014	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Nordstrom	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2015	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Paul Nordstrom	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2016	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers

Annual Report Year	President	Secretary	Vice President	Treasurer	Director	Director	Director	Director
2017	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2018	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2019	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2020	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers
2021	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers	
2022	Shawn Walsh	Jay Linksman	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Patti Furlano	Larry Wiers	
2023	Chris Mehochko	Jay Linksman	Patti Furlano	Chris Mehochko	Shawn Walsh	Paul Nordstrom	Larry Wiers	



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