Biden's pick for Secretary of Education: What to expect from Cardona?

written by Lois Weiner | December 22, 2020

Biden's choice for Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, has all the personal characteristics many teachers have asked for – a Hispanic educator raised in the projects, a former classroom teacher (for a brief time) who rose through the ranks of school administration, someone who "gets" what it's like in a classroom. He seems like a real educator. At the same time, his appointment, suggested by Linda Darling-Hammond, a much-respected liberal expert in education policy, revered in some progressive circles, captures why teacher activists have to see beyond the rhetoric and individual characteristics to the politics that underlie this choice. Because Cardona has a limited track record in educational policy and as his Linked-In profile shows, few high-level connections, we can better understand what he likely represents for Biden by looking at Darling-Hammond and her longtime allies, the NEA, AFT, and unions that supported the Obama administration as a "friend of labor."

Darling-Hammond has had a stellar record as a scholar of education policy, especially teacher education, examining how to increase educational opportunity for those long denied what was due them because of social oppression: racism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism. She vigorously contested the spurious research about Teach for America, part of the neoliberal plan globally to deprofessionalize teaching, aimed at putting minimally trained grads from elite colleges into schools serving students who need the best trained, best educated teachers. Accolades given her for that research are well-deserved. Still, the policies she has advanced since her involvement with the Obama administration have attempted to square the circle, making the neoliberal project more equitable rather than challenging its destructive premises of privatization and the Democrats' use of education reform as a substitute for addressing festering economic inequality.

To understand the convergence of Darling-Hammond's ideas with what the Democrats will pursue in Biden's administration, look at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) which she created, with the purpose of "Promoting Data-Driven 'Deeper Learning'." To understand LPI's aims, examine its political interlocks. LPI accepts as a given the future capitalist elites have planned for education: intensification of privatization with education technology, in particular the widespread use of proprietary software and public/private partnerships – a form of privatization that allows

corporations to make profits from public funding. LPI's links to big money in the Democratic Party, both the center and its purportedly more progressive wing including unions, show up in projects LPI's staff undertake, advancing the aims of "big data" transforming education, carrying out what the World Bank, the OECD, and tech billionaires have planned for us, a project researchers are now exposing and some unions are fighting, as I describe elsewhere.

What seem to be victories in LPI's projects for equity and teachers' voice, like new "performance assessments," occur within a framework of ceding control to Silicon Valley and Wall Street over what our children learn and how our teachers teach, for example in Big Picture Learning. The "big picture" LPI endorses is not one parents, teachers, or students have created. It consists of using online education for job retraining, linking learning, from early childhood years through college, to educational outcomes corporations say they need, vocationalizing education and taking more professional control away from teachers in deciding how and what they will teach, as standardized testing and its standardized curriculum have done. The networks of big money pushing privatization and surveillance with ed tech, documented so well by the blog "Wrench in the Gears," are as staggering as they are chilling. LPI is deeply embedded and in bed with this undertaking, urged on by AFT and NEA.

It may be that Cardona will reject LPI's assumptions and use his new post and power to resist the moguls who control the Democratic Party and have started the new bipartisan neoliberal project. Cardona's presence as an invited speaker at a session on "Investing in education: Criteria for Success" at the Yale School of Management Educational Leadership Conference, along with representatives of big data and big profits, does not, by itself, tell us how he will manage demands made on him and the U.S. Department of Education, though it shows his political orbit. Nor do I think we can predict his actions from how he handled competing demands in school reopening as Commissioner of Education in CT, how he will respond to teachers' activism about the terrible life-and-death choices COVID-19 and capitalism have forced on teachers, students, and parents.

Precisely because Cardona has not been deeply involved in setting national policy, we may have an opening to push him to stand up for what public education needs: Not a penny to venture capital and corporations pillaging public funds that should go directly to public schools. Not one piece of personal data given to ed tech to monetize. No use of school resources to advance "platform capitalism." Parents, teachers, students who use the schools have the right to shape their future, to reimagine and make it. We want equality of educational outcomes as well as economic security for working people, health care, housing, food security – a program for social justice and school quality. We should let Miguel Cardona know we want to have his back if he defends what schools, teachers, students really need – while we simultaneously prepare for his not doing so.