

Harvard's embrace of Christie - shameful but not surprising

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Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) at one time had space for progressive ideas, (that's where I earned my doctorate) but it was never a "liberal bastion." True HGSE had space for critique of US society, but the culture and institutional structure were dominated by the very wealthy annoyed that their children had to be exposed to critiques of US society in order to get the Harvard credential to which they consider themselves entitled. As neoliberal thinking has permeated US society, HGSE has been making its ideological contribution to the struggle, on behalf of the advantaged, masking its shift in the rhetoric of supporting equal educational opportunity. HGSE gets much of its money from foundations funded by what Diane Ravitch has termed the "Billionaire Boys Club" (BBC hereafter) and directly from the guys themselves.

So the term BBC accurately conveys the class nature of the attack on public education. However, there's much more to this mammoth social engineering we're witnessing. As I explain in a panel with Ravitch and a piece for NP, this is an international political project that aims to satisfy capitalism's most ardent desire, a compliant workforce. The project requires destruction of teachers unions, which are the most stable and potentially powerful force to protect the structures of public education and teachers' potential to convey ideals of democracy and social justice that threaten the behemoth. Howard Stevenson puts this well:

"Teachers deal with ideas, and the importance of their ideological function is well understood. There is of course nothing inevitable about what teachers do or how they work - education has the power both to reproduce and transform, and will always contain elements of both and be a struggle between both. Teachers do not automatically work in progressive ways - but it is their potential to work in critical and transformatory ways that mean they are always a threat to the established social order."

In welcoming a governor who has built his political career by bullying teachers and making clear his goal of destroying teachers unions, HGSE does not surprise. Of a piece with inviting an avowed union-buster is the refusal to tenure Mark Warren, a faculty member whose research and activity demonstrated commitment to democratic school reform. The sort of bastion HGSE is and has always been is one of social privilege. HGSE's contribution on the wrong side of the class struggle has just changed along with the rich and powerful who have always controlled the media and institutions. They no longer think they have to allow space for critique.