

New York Democratic governor enlists tech billionaires to push distance learning

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In a move that will accelerate the privatization of education, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced Reimagine Education, a new partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which will also include Eric Schmidt, one of the founders of Google.

The new endeavor, announced last week, is intended to utilize the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic to vastly expand virtual learning for the 4.2 million public school students in the state. This initiative will place significant control of public education in the hands of Bill Gates, the second-richest man in the world with a net worth \$105 billion. New York state, which includes the nation's largest public school system in New York City, will then set the pace across the country.

Since the start of the pandemic, many of New York's K-12 students have been attending virtual classes with their teachers. This form of education, necessitated by the closing of schools on March 18 to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, is widely viewed as a stop-gap measure to prevent students from falling too far behind in their education.

Reimagine Education was announced in tandem with massive cuts to state and local education budgets, including the loss of over \$827 million from the New York City's Department of Education alone.

Referring to Bill Gates, the billionaire founder of Microsoft, as "a visionary" and suggesting that "we now have a moment in history where we can actually incorporate" Gates's ideas on education, the governor told a press conference: "We've all been talking about tele-education, virtual education, remote education, and there's a lot that can be done. The old model of everybody goes and sits in a classroom and the teacher is in front of that classroom and teaches that class, and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms. Why, with all the technology you have?"

The effectiveness—or ineffectiveness—of remote learning from a teacher by an online platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams cannot yet be fully assessed, but it is already clear that it is not an adequate replacement for personal, face-to-face interactions with students.

Distance learning under conditions of the pandemic has been an enormous strain on working-class and middle-class families. A parent often must be present or nearby during a lesson, a condition that is impossible when parents are essential workers. Teachers with school-age children of their own have been under even

greater pressure.

Many special education needs often cannot be met by remote education, a fact that New York City's Department of Education admitted when it substantially relaxed its standards for special education students in March. Student attendance is low, particularly in the poorest areas of the state. Mental health and counseling services to students have been almost impossible with closed schools.

The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation is a staunch supporter of charter schools, privately-owned but publicly-funded schools that are a drain on public education budgets. Through the promotion of charter schools, traditional public schools have been systematically defunded and, in New York City and cities across the US, physically displaced.

Cuomo enthusiastically embraced the Common Core curriculum after 2010, when it was a featured component of Barack Obama's Race To The Top education legislation and was heavily promoted by Gates. Common Core further tied school funding to students' performance on standardized tests, a decades-long trend in education. After massive opposition to the program and the development of an #optout movement among teachers, parents and students, Cuomo abandoned the Common Core in 2015.

Gates has continued his efforts to privatize public education with various "reform" incursions. These have included a billion-dollar effort between 2009 and 2016 to increase teacher "effectiveness," widely judged to be a failure, and a revamped attempt to develop new school curriculums in 2018.

The involvement of former Google executive Eric Schmidt is no less unsettling. Schmidt is chair of the Defense Innovation Board, an advisory board to the Department of Defense on the use of artificial intelligence. In 2014, Schmidt effectively attempted to clear the National Security Agency of illegal spying when he denied any knowledge of NSA access to Google's data.

Google has become one of the major purveyors of Internet censorship since 2017, when it systematically manipulated search results for content appearing on a number of left-wing and anti-war sites, in particular those for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Such censorship, which continues today, is inherently hostile to the democratic rights of the working class and the learning needs of students and educators.

Cuomo has so far not outlined the scope of Reimagine Education or the extent of its collaboration with the Gates Foundation and Schmidt, but it has set off alarm bells among teachers and

education advocates.

One petition to the New York Board of Regents, which oversees education in the state, has gathered over 100,000 signatures. The petition states: “Our kids need the right amount and kind of technology and then only as a tool, not the primary vehicle to learning. There are no shortcuts. NY students are not Bill Gates’ guinea pigs for his education experiments and agendas. Our governor doesn’t utilize research into best learning practices.”

An open letter from teachers to the Regents says, “We ask that you urge the Governor to fund our schools sufficiently and equitably, to allow for the smaller classes, school counselors, and other critical services that our children will need more than ever before, given the myriad losses they have experienced this year.”

These are heartfelt pleas by educators, but they are politically misled by the unions, and “progressive” education advocates in and around the Democratic Party. New York State United Teachers President Andrew Pallotta said in a statement on the Gates endeavor, “If we want to reimagine education, let’s start with addressing the need for social workers, mental health counselors, school nurses, enriching arts courses, advanced courses and smaller class sizes in school districts across the state.

“Let’s secure the federal funding and new state revenues through taxes on the ultrawealthy that can go toward addressing these needs,” he said, adding that educators should be involved in discussions about improving the system.

This is bluster designed to appeal to parents and educators by putting forward proposals—a tax on billionaires—that no union or Democratic Party politician will fight to implement. That party is committed to protecting the wealth of billionaire investors on Wall Street, not to redistributing it.

For its part, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which represents teachers in New York City, has not yet commented on the Cuomo-Gates plan, although last week it retweeted a research article that looks on distance learning favorably.

Education advocate Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters appealed to Cuomo and warned him that another #optout movement could arise, as it did with fierce opposition by parents, educators and students to Common Core.

Diane Ravitch, the education historian and opponent of charter schools, correctly noted on her blog of Gates and Schmidt’s involvement with public education in New York, “The pandemic is turning into a grand opportunity for the foxes to raid the hen house under cover of darkness.”

But the political core of her message is her endless campaign to pressure the Democratic Party, no matter its palpable failure. Ravitch twice endorsed Obama, but now characterizes his record as the ultimate privatization agenda. Nonetheless she plaintively asks, “Why doesn’t Gov. Cuomo listen to parents and teachers and students, who will tell him to reinvent schools by fully funding them?” She suggested that an appeal to the Board of Regents was appropriate.

The 17 Regents, who oversee all education in the state from primary to university, are elected to terms of five years by the New York state legislature, one of the most corrupt institutions in the US whether dominated by Republicans or Democrats, who currently hold power.

The fact that Cuomo’s Reimagine Education plan is part of a right-wing juggernaut to privatize education is seen from even a cursory examination of the members of the committee he has appointed to advise him on the plan.

Katie Campos, for example, served in Cuomo’s cabinet as Assistant Secretary for Education in 2011. She worked on the 2008 Obama Campaign and for the pro-charter Democrats for Education Reform, and was Director of Public Affairs for the New York Charter Schools Association.

Another member is Dennis Walcott, the former Chancellor of Schools in New York City under billionaire Michael Bloomberg. In 2011, Walcott oversaw the co-location of 15 charter schools in New York City public school buildings in the face of massive protests by teachers and parents.

Most significant of all is the inclusion of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten on the committee. Weingarten is an expert at quashing teachers’ dissent and channeling it back into the Democratic Party. She has played a pivotal role in suppressing the nationwide wave of teachers strike since 2018.

More recently, Weingarten has put forward “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities” which is, as the WSWWS noted, “in line with the demands of Wall Street and the Trump administration to reopen business.”

Distance learning in itself is not the problem; it can and should be used to enrich and expand knowledge and educational attainment universally. However, the aim of the billionaires is to use their private control of this socially-developed technology to vastly increase their wealth at the expense of students, educators and the population.

The technology industries must be turned into public utilities, made free and available to all through a massive investment in universal broadband. At the same time, teachers must be supported with ample time and resources to knowledgeably utilize these technologies. The plans of Gates, Schmidt, et al. have nothing to do with expanding educational access and everything to do with profiting from the pandemic-induced, chaotic adoption of online learning.

Educators must assert their right, with parents and the whole working class, to decide what role distance learning should play in education in schools, and when and under what conditions schools are reopened. These fundamental questions of education should have nothing to do with profit and should be decided by rank-and-file committees composed of representatives among educators, parents, students and scientists.



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