

Malign neglect in New York schools: The politics of the SUNY Board of Trustees

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The reopening of college campuses at the State University of New York (SUNY) has led to a series of catastrophes. On September 3, SUNY Oneonta was forced to close all on-campus activities after 500 students tested positive for COVID 19. Just two weeks later, SUNY Oswego was forced to switch to two weeks of online instruction after 200 students tested positive in a 14-day period.

The total number of students who have contracted the virus has risen to nearly 2,000 just one month into the new semester. Testing remains insufficient, with fewer than 122,000 tests administered on the 64 campuses that serve 1.4 million SUNY students. Rather than closing schools until the virus is under control, SUNY has taken to vilifying students, creating harsh punishment guidelines for students who break social distancing rules.

The response of SUNY to the pandemic is bound up with its ties to the Democratic Party and New York state government, which has enthusiastically endorsed the policy of herd immunity and the drive to reopen schools. In order to understand the response of the SUNY system to COVID-19, it is important to examine the membership of its Board of Trustees and its particular connections to the Democratic Party apparatus, the military and state, as well as the ruling class as a whole.

Chancellor: James Malatras

James Malatras was appointed as chancellor in August of 2020 after his predecessor, Kristina M. Johnson, left to become the president of Ohio State University. Malatras is not an educator, but a political adviser by profession. His first job was as a staff member for Democratic Assembly member Richard L. Brodsky from 2000 to 2007. In 2007 he became a policy adviser to the state's future governor, Andrew Cuomo. At the time, Cuomo was working as attorney general of New York state.

Following Cuomo's election as governor in 2011, Malatras was shifted around to multiple jobs within the state government, including as executive director of the New York Education Reform Commission and as SUNY Vice Chancellor for Policy and Chief of Staff. In 2014 he left the SUNY administration to return to Cuomo's side where he worked as the director of state operations.

Malatras was also an adviser to Cuomo on his response to the pandemic. Despite media praise, Cuomo's response was completely negligent, allowing New York to become the global epicenter as 30,000 New Yorkers died from the virus.

Chair: Merryl H. Tisch

Merryl H. Tisch is the chairperson of the Board of Trustees, appointed to this position in September of 2019. Before her time on the SUNY board she served for 20 years on the New York Board of Regents, acting as chancellor from 2009 to 2015.

As a member of the Board of Regents, Tisch implemented George Bush's No Child Left Behind policy, a direct attack on teachers and public education that launched the tying of school funding to test scores. As chancellor, she was a leading advocate for high-stakes testing evaluations under Obama's Race to the Top competition and Common Core standards, which slashed education budgets and closed underperforming districts, all while increasing the number of charter schools.

While schools were being defunded, Tisch swam in unimaginable wealth. She is married to James S. Tisch, heir to the Loews Corporation, with huge assets in hotels, oil refining and finance. The Tisch family is worth \$6 billion, placing them among the top fifty families in the country. Privatized education would certainly be a lucrative investment opportunity for a company like Loews.

The Tisch family is also involved in both Democratic and Republican politics in New York City, having supported Republican Rudy Giuliani and Democrat Bill Thompson for mayor among other political ventures.

Vice Chair: Cesar Perales

Cesar Perales is the vice chair on the SUNY Board of Trustees, taking the position after the promotion of Tisch from vice chair to chair. Perales is a long time political operative of the Democratic Party. In the 1970s, he worked as the regional director of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) before rising to the administration of President Jimmy Carter as the department's assistant secretary.

After the Carter administration, Perales continued his career in the Democratic Party. During the 1980s he served as commissioner of the New York State Department of Social Services under Governor Mario Cuomo (father of the current governor), and in New York City he served as deputy mayor to David Dinkins from 1990 to 1993.

In 2011, Perales was appointed as the 66th secretary of the New York Department of State, before which he had spent time working as

a lawyer and top adviser to Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Robert Duffy

Before entering politics, Duffy was a police officer in Rochester, New York. Starting his career in 1976, Duffy became deputy chief of police in 1992 and chief of police in 1998. Several killings by police occurred during his time leading the RPD. Complaints of racial profiling were also rampant, and police infamously intimidated attendees of the Puerto Rican Festival by showing up in riot gear to disperse the crowd in 2004.

Duffy served as mayor of Rochester from 2006 to 2011. His most notable action as mayor was his proposal to abolish the Rochester Board of Education and place the school district under direct control of the mayor and city council. Duffy claimed that the school board was ineffective and inefficient. In reality, the policy centered around removing elected officials from the education process. This proposal is still in contention today as the school district racks up an \$85 million budget deficit after more than a decade of austerity.

Duffy was selected as Andrew Cuomo's running mate in his 2010 bid for New York governor. With Cuomo's victory, Duffy became lieutenant governor from 2011 to 2014. As such, Duffy participated in the implementation of the disastrous Common Core program.

He is now the president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce, representing the city's business community.

Richard Socarides

Richard Socarides is currently the head of Global Corporate Communications and Government Affairs for Gerson Lehrman Group, a company that provides guidance to corporations and investment firms. Before that, he was the vice president for corporate relations at AOL Time Warner and has worked at several prominent New York law firms.

Politically, Socarides was a top adviser to Democratic Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, in 1991-1992. Harkin was a member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, which is in charge of allocating funds to US imperialist projects around the globe, including \$2 billion in funding for the Israeli military.

As a Democratic presidential candidate in 1991 Harkin was an enthusiastic proponent of the first Gulf War. In a speech to the American section of the World Jewish Congress, Harkin attacked Republican President George H.W. Bush for "coddling" then-Syrian president Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Harkin was also one of many congressional Democrats who voted in support of the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq.

From 1993 to 1999, Socarides held several top advisory positions in the Clinton administration, most notably as chief operating officer of the 50th Anniversary Summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

It was during this NATO conference that the alliance's new "strategic concept" was announced, projecting NATO power abroad. Its immediate effect was to justify the US bombing of Yugoslavia by

Bill Clinton, which laid the groundwork for further imperialist interventions in the future, including the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Socarides is also a fervent promoter of identity politics. Socarides promotes himself as a gay rights advocate, although his service in the Clinton administration has tarnished this image due to Clinton's signing of the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman, as well as his support of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the US armed forces. Socarides refers to these episodes as "very principled decisions" necessary for Clinton's reelection.

Chair of Community College Committee: Stanley S. Litow

Stanley S. Litow is IBM's former vice president of corporate citizenship and corporate affairs. Prior to his time at IBM, Litow worked as the deputy chancellor of New York City Public Schools from 1989 to 1993, where he was influential in collective bargaining talks with school unions, extracting concessions from educators and school workers when budget cuts were made.

A regular commentator on education issues, Litow frequently refers to the education "business model" and approaches education issues along the nationalistic lines of preserving American "competitiveness" in the job market. As far as Litow is concerned with the quality of education in the United States, it is only to supply companies like IBM with domestic labor.

Litow's response to the pandemic is indicative of the forces guiding SUNY policy. In mid-April 2020, Litow wrote an article for the *New York Daily News* in which he argued against the closing of schools in response to the virus. He argued that the loss of education would be too great and that sending students home would be more detrimental than any amount of harm caused by the virus.

As with all of these board members, the protection of profits comes before the needs of students and educators for SUNY's Board of Trustees. The eruption of COVID-19 infections at the school system's various campuses is the practical result of the social interests they serve.



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