Tennessee Republican Governor silent as ultra-conservative charter school peddler calls public school teachers “dumb”

Jane Wise
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During a private event hosted recently by Hillsdale College president Larry Arnn in an affluent suburb of Nashville, surprise guest Tennessee Republican Governor Bill Lee sat quietly as Arnn said education is a “plague” and called public school teachers and the colleges that train them “dumb.”

Hidden camera footage of the reception obtained by a Nashville television station revealed the college president, Governor Lee’s education advisor and personal friend, meandering through remarks which disparaged public education and accused teachers of indoctrinating students.

Among Larry Arnn’s most egregious comments:

> “...they (education students) are the dumbest part of every campus.”
>
> “The teachers are trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country.'
>
> “They (teachers) are taught that they are going to go and do something to those kids.... Do they ever talk about anything except what they are going to do to these kids?'
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> “The philosophic understanding at the heart of modern education is enslavement…. They're messing with people's children, and they feel entitled to do anything to them.”
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> “You will see how education destroys generations of people. It's devastating. It's like the plague.”
>
> “Here's a key thing that we're going to try to do. We are going to try to demonstrate that you don't have to be an expert to educate a child because basically anybody can do it.”

Throughout the two-hour event, Governor Lee praised Arnn and Hillsdale College, with whom the Governor has contracted to open 50 American Classical Education K-12 charter schools in Tennessee. Asked to comment on the college president’s derision of the 80,000 public school teachers in his state, Governor Lee’s office responded with boilerplate from his education plan: “Under Gov. Lee, the future of public education looks like well-paid teachers and growing a workforce to support our students and build the profession.”

Hillsdale College, located in rural Michigan, built its conservative bona fides by refusing federal or state funds. Called the “shining city on a hill” by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who helped facilitate President Trump’s January 6, 2020 coup attempt, Hillsdale’s $900 million endowment relies on deep-pocketed libertarian benefactors such as the Ed Uihlein Family Foundation, Dorothy D. and Joseph A. Moller Foundation, and Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation. However, by far the largest chunk of monies comes through Donors Trust, a donor-advised fund that allows for anonymous donations from those who value “limited government, personal responsibility, and free enterprise,” according to Sourcewatch.org.

Founded in 1844 by abolitionist baptists, Hillsdale College describes its curriculum as based on “Western philosophical and theological inheritance tracing to Athens and Jerusalem.” Though its website states the “inseparable purposes” of the school as “learning, character, faith, and freedom,” it was described in Vanity Fair as “a feeder school” for the Trump administration, in light of the number of staff and

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alumni with ties to the former president.

Under Larry Arnn, Hillsdale College is branching out to K-12 students by providing curricula and building classical academy charter schools for states like Tennessee. Arnn, who led President Trump's 1776 Commission in reaction to the racialist New York Times 1619 Project, is working with states such as Tennessee and Florida to make over their civics curricula with the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum.

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, the darling of public education privatization, has carved out $32 million in the state's $7 billion education budget for charter schools this year. In his State of the State address at the beginning of this year, Lee praised Hillsdale College's curriculum as a "standard bearer in quality curriculum," and announced Tennessee was "formalizing a partnership with Hillsdale to expand their approach to civics education and K-12 education."

Tennessee colleges and universities published letters in defense of their students and their education programs. The Tennessee Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (TACTE) rebuked the Hillsdale President's comments by calling them "uninformed and cynical." TACTE called for Governor Lee to stand up for the nearly 80,000 public schools teachers in Tennessee. With an irony the Governor was sure to miss, the letter pointed out, "We have equally high standards for Educator Preparation Providers, and the quality of our programs are scrutinized yearly by your Department of Education along with the State Board of Education."

Democratic politicians in Tennessee have professed their indignation at Arnn's comments, with Tennessee Democratic representative Gloria Johnson organized a press conference with fellow Democratic legislator Sam McKenzie in Knoxville to "lift up" teacher voices. However, the politicians ended the event with no plan of action except the routine entreaties to write and call their state representatives and to vote for candidates who support education.

Notably absent at the press conference was the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), the state affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA). When asked by the WSWS what the largest teachers organization in the state had to say about the Hillsdale President's comments, a spokesman noted the NEA's annual convention was taking place in Chicago, so the TEA had not fully responded to the issue.

In about 100 words, TEA president Tanya Coates chided Larry Arnn and Governor Lee:

> "...To now witness their governor stand silently alongside out-of-state privatizers as they are cruelly and unfairly attacked feels like a punch to the gut.
>
> Our governor would do well to remember that the continued success of our state is intrinsically tied to the success of our system of strong public schools, not charter schools…"

Governor Lee has made every effort to defund public schools in Tennessee since he took office in 2019. Clearly, "strong public schools" are not on his agenda.

The entirely pro forma defense of teachers and public education by Tennessee's politicians and teachers associations only serves to cover up the true scale of indignities teachers suffer at the hands of the drive by the far right to defund public education.

Teachers cannot rely on Democratic politicians and teachers unions whose indifference to the health and well-being of educators was starkly evidenced during the pandemic by their drive to reopen schools in the midst of COVID and their refusal to fight for better salaries and overall quality of schools. As a result record number of teachers are leaving the profession and there is dwindling enrollment in teacher preparatory programs. In order to win better pay and better working conditions, and stem the drive towards privatization of our public schools, teachers must expand the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees by joining or forming rank-and-file committees in their workplaces. For more information and to get involved, go to wsws.org/edsafety.

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