

Book Review

Diane Ravitch. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 296 pp. Hardcover \$26.95.

Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, a widespread commitment to orthodoxy has dominated national and state education policy circles. A clear path takes us from the 1989 Education Goals Summit during President George H. W. Bush's administration, to passage of the Goals 2000 legislation during the Clinton administration, to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 during George W. Bush's presidency, and, finally, to the Obama administration's education policies. In an obvious rejection of the language and focus associated with the original authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed during the Johnson Administration—anti-poverty, opportunity, social mobility, resources, equity, and parental empowerment—orthodox reformers have substituted a different vocabulary and focus. The central tenets of this orthodoxy are that data created by standardized assessments, together with market-driven reforms such as choice and vouchers, are central to and perhaps sufficient for reform of America's schools. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, one of the original proponents of this orthodoxy, Diane Ravitch, offers a scathing critique of it.

Ravitch's extremely accessible analysis attacks her subject from a number of perspectives. She digs deeply into the reports and rhetoric surrounding top-down education reform, particularly as it was employed in New York City and San Diego. Her analysis of the impact of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's signature market-based choice agenda in New York also provides a wealth of information regarding the impact of these policies over time. It is a cautionary analysis because it demonstrates how ideology and marketing trump "data" at every turn.

Ravitch's earlier work includes a response to scholars on the left who criticized public schools as tools of the elite, established to regiment and control the poor. In *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (1978), Ravitch argued that public schools are a central mechanism available to a democracy allowing that democracy to provide its citizens with both literacy and mobility. But in what is certainly one of the most provocative chapters in Ravitch's latest work, "The Billionaire Boys Club," Ravitch sees philanthropic organizations as mechanisms that drown out the democratic voice, a voice which she

views as crucial in operating and improving our nation's schools. Ravitch pulls no punches in her analysis of "venture philanthropies" and their determination to achieve for American schools what they want, how they want it. Focusing particularly on the Broad, Gates, and Walton Foundations, she notes that while these foundations initially entered the field of education reform with different emphases, eventually their approaches converged on reform strategies that "mirrored their own experience in acquiring huge fortunes, such as competition, choice, deregulation, incentives, and other market-based approaches" (p. 200). Despite their devaluing of concepts important in government and education such as experience, consultation, and collaboration, Ravitch argues their huge wealth allows these foundations to hijack the democratic institutions responsible for public education from the local to the national levels. And, because they are totally unaccountable to the public, these proponents of accountability and evidence-based reform, in Ravitch's view, are undermining the very crucial democratic function of public education.

While choice and accountability were major themes of the school reform movement before President Obama took office, the new thread that has gained a central place in the reform tapestry today is pay for performance and individual teacher accountability based primarily on "added-value" changes in student test scores on state assessments. Here, too, Ravitch's dissection of the reformers' arguments is devastating. She couples her piercing analysis with an ode to teaching by holding up her senior English instructor in a Houston, TX, public high school in a chapter titled "What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?" Most of us can recall our own Mrs. Ratliff; and most parents want their children to have the benefit of schools that recruit, value, and retain teachers like Mrs. Ratliff — teachers who inspire and make heavy demands on students; who care about students and the realities of their everyday lives; teachers immersed in and continuing to be stirred and challenged by their disciplines; who are exciting and creative; and who take risks and try new approaches. Ravitch doubts that Mrs. Ratliff would be motivated by merit pay or that her greatness would necessarily be reflected in unusual increases in student test scores. While in no way excusing or suggesting that poor teachers or poor teaching should be tolerated, as an alternative to a simplistic approach to teacher evaluation as the cure-all for our schools, Ravitch reiterates her earlier calls for a voluntary national curriculum, for excellence in teacher training and professional development, and for treating teachers as true professionals with appropriate protections from arbitrary political and personal interference.

The new Congress, which took office this past January, includes many members from the far right who believe that national school

improvement is not a priority, that there should be no national standards or assessments—whether mandatory or voluntary—and that the future of poor children faced with failing schools is no cause for concern for the American economy or national security. We have already heard their earliest attacks on current education orthodoxy. Many progressives have a deep commitment to a federal role in ensuring educational equity and improving educational quality. However, they instinctively question the simple panacea, the silver bullet. They are equally suspect of a set of educational approaches put forward for “other peoples’ children.” For all who share these concerns, and for those committed to the current administration’s education policies, Ravitch’s latest work is required reading.

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