



*The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How  
Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*  
by Diane Ravitch

New York: Basic Books, 2010. x; 271 pp. \$17.00

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When I first heard that Diane Ravitch had “changed her mind” about current education reform embodied in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), I was both shocked and intrigued. How could this have happened? What, exactly, prompted such a radical paradigm shift? For nearly a decade Ravitch has sung the praises of accountability and standards, while assuring Americans that market-driven management and incentives would effectively reform our deteriorating education system. In her estimation, the system was broken by leftist-inspired reforms that watered-down content in favor of relevance as well as by constructivist notions of knowledge and pedagogy. Also frustrated by the lack of “excellence” and “rigor,” and the loss of a romanticized past of social unity, Ravitch quickly became a leading voice for the conservative movement in education. The gap between liberal and conservative educational reformers regarding the status of NCLB, of course, couldn’t get much wider. For this reason, Ravitch’s change of heart invites further investigation. Although many on the left feel vindicated by her recent admissions, others are suspicious of the tardiness of her decision. Regardless of one’s attitude toward Ravitch and her body of work, there is much to be learned through this text about today’s conflicted educational landscape.

The first story offered in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* is one of upper middle class privilege and sentimentality. Ravitch recounts being forced to finally repaint her Brooklyn office, and in the packing and unpacking of a life’s work she rediscovered what she began her career thinking about concerning schools and communities. Although Ravitch is a trained historian and scholar, she somehow forgot or failed to trust what history has always delivered—insight into the present. One might read her intellectual rehabilitation moment cynically as a calculated ploy to sell books; or one might view it as an incredible act of courage. As I read the book, I experienced both of these emotions.

Ravitch (2010) is direct throughout and states clearly where she currently stands, “The short answer is that my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality” (p.2). She continues her confessional by explaining,

I too had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. (p.3)



“Quick fixes,” “miracle cures,” and “bandwagon” mentality—nothing sounds more American, and as Americans these themes resonate. I understand that these ideas appeal to average citizens who lack a complex understanding of the American education system. Most citizens fail to recognize the socio-political forces that influence schools, and do not readily associate schools as deeply political institutions, nor do they recognize the intellectual intensity demanded of its teachers. But, how did a woman who earned a PhD in *history* from Columbia University, who was mentored by Lawrence Cremin, and whose first published article was entitled “Programs, Placebos, Panaceas” (1968), fall prey to such empty jargon, and hopelessly unattainable goals as those outlined in NCLB?

Ravitch’s questioning of NCLB became public through a series of articles, one of which was in *Education Week* entitled, “Time to Kill ‘No Child Left Behind,’” where she summarizes concisely many of the ideas that would soon appear in her latest book. Contending that NCLB has failed to deliver the intended results, she hopes that the Obama administration will forgo tinkering with the law, but rather create a new vision of education that returns to the basic tenets of building a participatory democracy through public schooling. Throughout Ravitch’s new book she longs for the days of sound neighborhood public schools that taught students to be democratic citizens committed to a common set of values with communities and families at the center. She concisely and rather successfully unravels the defining aspects of today’s education climate with an analysis of all the usual suspects: the testing cult, institutional lying to bolster the creation of “reformed” districts (District 2 in New York City and San Diego), the business model applied to education (the shift from Superintendents to CEOs), accountability, teacher tenure, the dismissal of ineffective teachers, school choice (now the charter school movement), and what she calls “philanthrocapitalism” (p.199) which represents the new venture philanthropy of organizations such as the Gates Foundations. However, nothing in her discussion is original or novel. Instead, it echoes the resounding body of critical scholarship that has been generated as a response to NCLB. Many eloquent critics of NCLB have voiced their opposition, rallied, and protested in the last decade, but few were heard by those in Washington think-tanks and positions of legislative power. So while it is difficult not to admire aspects of Ravitch’s book, many passages were met with a resounding “duh!” as I read her book.

Her narrative reads like a great mystery novel full of twists and turns and back ally deals with shady organizations. However, Ravitch only begins to get at the real issue that lies at the heart of her text—the relationship between democracy and schools. What does it mean to have democratic institutions within a pluralistic society as diverse as America? What is the role of education within American society to bring about democracy? Horace Mann (1848), one of the chief architects of the American public school system, offered this as the purpose of American education:

Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men,—the balance wheel of the social machinery. I do not here mean that it so elevates the moral nature as to make men disdain and abhor the oppression of their fellow men. This idea pertains to another of its attributes. But I mean that it gives each man the independence and the means by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich: it prevents being poor. (para.6)

Phrases such as the “great equalizer,” have been a central legitimizing myth of American educational system. Yet, historical reality does not prove this to be unambiguously true, especially given the rates of poverty among children in this nation, and the perpetual “savage inequalities” that exist in public school funding. Ravitch would argue that education has been a “great equalizer,” one so powerful that it has prevented a great many waves of immigrant populations from remaining in poverty, and helped them to assimilate and prosper within the nation. Ravitch recounts her early inability to understand leftist historians’ rewriting of public school history as oppressive as they argued against the “widespread myth about the benevolent purposes and democratic accomplishments of public education” (p.5). She acknowledges that “this point of view was so contrary to my own understanding of the liberating role of public education” (p.5). This is a fundamental difference between Ravitch and her detractors—the metanarrative of American educational history.

This difference can also be found in the subtle way she mythologizes her beloved high school English teacher Mrs. Ratliff. Ravitch extols the virtues of “proper English,” “exacting standards,” and “accuracy,” while claiming Mrs. Ratliff did “nothing for our self-esteem.” Yet, Mrs. Ratliff somehow accomplished this feat without multiple choice tests, or the reading of banal textbooks, but through poetry and stories of distant times (Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” is remembered by Ravitch) that earned Mrs. Ratliff the respect of the students (p.170). Rarely does a teacher earn the respect and adoration of her students without reaching them where they are and pulling them toward something new. I suspect that Ravitch remembers Mrs. Ratliff because she showed her what she might be, what she could be, and confirmed for her what every young person should feel—recognition and self worth. Mrs. Ratliff did what all great teachers do; they convince students that they can actually do what they thought impossible, that their ideas matter, and that they have value as human beings. This is seen in the graduation gifts of poetry Mrs. Ratliff personalized and gave publically to each student. Ravitch received “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” and “among them, but not of them” (p.170). This example speaks to the undeniable fact that the life of a classroom is an aesthetic experience, an emotional experience, that helps form our perceptive faculties of both self and others. Thus, the art of teaching must be recovered if we are going to reach students the way Mrs. Ratliff reached Diane Ravitch.

It is often said in teacher education classes that students long remember *how they felt* in a classroom rather than *what they learned*. Unfortunately, the consequences of NCLB have all too often created an aesthetic and/or emotional nightmare for many students. How many stories of third graders crying on testing day have to be told? How many kindergarteners have learned how to sit still and bubble in circles to “prepare” for the coming tests? How many mission statements exist that speak of children as products and commodities of a global marketplace? NCLB has had the obvious academic consequences by privileging only reading and math, and by devaluing civic education, science, and the humanities. Yet, the legislation has had a powerful influence on students’ identity formation as well, and in this sense can be seen as a form of emotional and aesthetic abuse, particularly among our most vulnerable populations. What is missing from Ravitch’s confessional, then, is a substantive discussion about these destructive consequences and a frank admission that real harm, at the deepest levels, was done to a generation of American school children.



Ravitch ends her book with a plea to rescind the current state of educational affairs, reject market driven principles, and return schools to their rightful place at the center of creating a democratic public. She argues,

Business leaders like the idea of turning the school into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is that it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. *Going to school is not the same as going shopping...*the market serves us well when we want to buy a pair of shoes or a new car or a can of paint; we can shop around for the best value or the style we like. The market is not the best way to deliver public services...privatizing our public schools makes as much sense as privatizing the fire department or the police department. It is possible, but it is not wise. (p.221) (my emphasis)

Although much of what Ravitch articulates in this book is not “new” to those who spend their days with children, or academics engaged in the education discipline, she should be cheered for publically changing her mind. Ravitch reminds us, “Doubt and skepticism are signs of rationality...it is doubt that shows we are still thinking, still willing to reexamine hardened beliefs when confronted with new facts and new evidence” (p.2). This book embodies, as an act, that which has been most democratic about the American tradition, our ability to speak freely, reach across differences in dialogue, revise deeply held ideas, and dissent without fear of reprisals. The question now arises, will the Obama administration listen to this cautionary tale, or will they continue to be wooed by those with deep pockets and shallow understandings?

## References

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