

# Ravitch Recants (somewhat)

Walter Parker

Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. ISBN 978-0-465-01491-0. \$26.95 283 pages.

**D**iane Ravitch has written another book about how schooling in the United States is failing and what can be done about it. The new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, is of special interest because, in it, Ravitch recants. She provides a welcome and articulate, if limited, critique of the “school reform” matrix in which we find ourselves today and which she has supported.

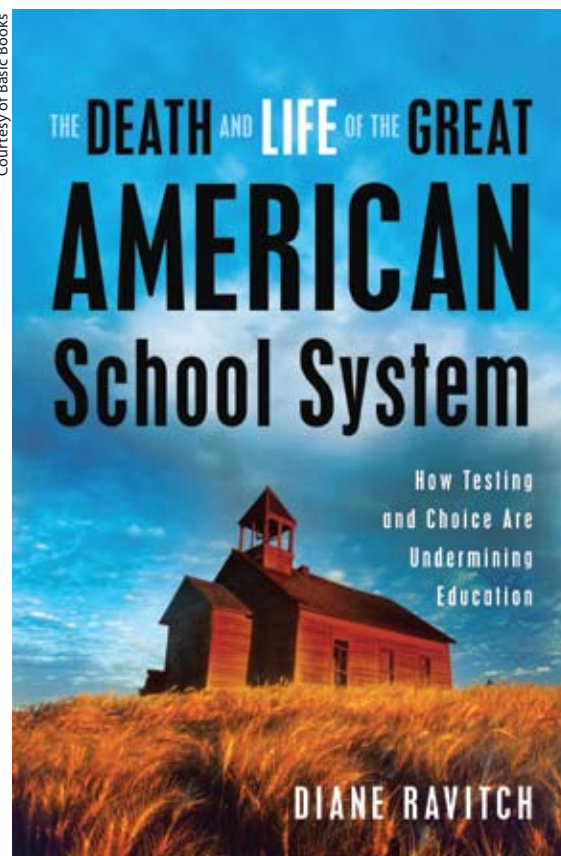
Ravitch is an historian of education who became an educational policymaker in conservative circles. Hers has been a view from afar, as she admits: “I began...looking at schools and teachers from an altitude of 20,000 feet and seeing them as objects to be moved around by big ideas and great plans.” (10) Historians try to understand things, policymakers must do things. Historians may be hesitant to influence the course of history, policymakers try to do precisely that.

Her histories are widely read. Because she has enjoyed a seat close to individuals and organizations with power, and because there is a great appetite in this nation for bad news about schools, her histories have had far-reaching effects. Among the concepts she has popularized is one that is a particular pest for people in our field: the introduction of the curious hyphenated term “history-social studies” or “history-social science.” From 20,000 feet, Ravitch has promoted the idea that the U.S. population’s historical ignorance is caused by the subject of “history” having been replaced by the subject

of “social studies” in the schools. Back on the ground, however, history is the

American, world (ancient, modern), and state history. One may not like how history is taught, one may wish for a different scope and sequence, one may argue about the textbooks, but however it is conceived, organized, and taught, history has clearly and resoundingly “won” the battle for curriculum space among the social subjects—the “social studies.” (One need only ask geographers and economists.) Blaming social studies for the nation’s historical ignorance amounts, therefore, to blaming the problem on one of its solutions—rather like blaming hunger on farming.

Ravitch’s publications also have helped promulgate the belief that the American school system is horribly broken. This drumbeat of derision has been so successful that, as one long-time observer put it, “People will believe anything you say about public schooling as long as it is bad.”<sup>1</sup> That belief rang out in the 1983 National Commission report *A Nation at Risk*, which claimed that the “mediocrity” of our schools was so profound that had it been imposed by “an unfriendly foreign power, we might well have viewed it as an act of war...” This is an urgent crisis-and-salvation narrative. The crisis narrative is that the nation is in a calamitous situation because schools are failing to educate students. The salvation narrative is that schools can rescue the nation. It is a simple formula. It has been called our “education gospel.”<sup>2</sup> Its key



unequaled queen of social studies. Most courses in middle and high school social studies departments are history courses:

tenet is that the school system is capable of saving society. Schooling is not seen to be embedded in society, mirroring and to a great extent reproducing it, but rather an independent arena above the fray. The historian Lawrence Cremin, Ravitch's mentor at Columbia, called this a "device" that repeatedly has been used in the United States. It was used by proponents of vocational education early in the twentieth century, by the post-Sputnik proponents of math and science education in the 1950s, in the 1980s by *A Nation at Risk*, and now in *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*. It has become a new "common sense."<sup>3</sup> Case in point: Unwittingly, a review of Ravitch's book at the *Boston Globe* begins, "Ever since Sputnik it's been common knowledge that the American educational system is on the verge of disaster." Common knowledge! Disaster! The only remaining question is how to fix the mess.

The upshot has been to lay the burden of the nation's knowledge quotient and international competitiveness at the schoolhouse door. The device is tidy, it's simple, and it's absurd. To contend that these problems can be solved by educational reform, Cremin argued, "especially educational reform *defined solely as school reform*, is not merely utopian and millennialist, it is at best a foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something."<sup>4</sup> According to Cremin, these include Congress, corporation managers, and a number of federal departments.

In this book, Ravitch recants neither her social-studies-is-the-enemy-of-history story nor her schools-are-horribly-broken story. I make this point not only because so much of the book's press and reviews act like she has recanted in toto but also because these errors continue to undermine the arguments she makes now. Let me turn to what she does recant.

She begins the book with this: "My views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality." (2) Which

ideas? Privatizing education, charter schools, choice, testing, and accountability. This is big, very big, because Ravitch has been a leader in the movement that brought all this about. "I got caught up in the rising tide of enthusiasm for choice in education," she writes. "I was swept along by my immersion in the upper reaches of the first Bush presidency (she was assistant secretary of education) where choice and competition were taken for granted as successful ways to improve student achievement." (127) She was swept along both by the Reagan-Bush market ideology and the "reinventing government" rhetoric of Clinton's "third way"—a path between the orthodoxies of the left and the right. The die was cast for a bipartisan consensus to emerge in the era of the second Bush's *No Child Left Behind* and continuing with Obama's *Race to the Top*. Platforms that "had once been the exclusive property of the conservative wing of the Republican party since Ronald Reagan's presidency had somehow managed to captivate education thinkers in the Democratic Party as well." (22)

What is important to grasp here, as Ravitch does, is that school reform itself became characterized in a certain way. How? It has been construed as "accountability, high-stakes testing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools. Whatever could not be measured did not count." (21) This is what "school reform" came to mean and now even casually means. Case in point: Ravitch explains that when Linda Darling-Hammond was considered as Obama's secretary of education, a chorus of criticism warned him not to choose her but instead a "real" school reformer. Darling-Hammond is an educator and educational researcher, not a professional athlete or banker, and she is known as an advocate of teacher professionalism and a critic of *Teach for America*.

This is what Ravitch now refutes—this narrow, entrenched, bipartisan definition of "school reform." She makes her argument across eleven chapters. Three are case studies, one of San Diego and two involving New York City schools. Chapters 2 and 7 are perhaps the core of the book. Chapter 10 documents the role played by big money from the Ford, Gates, and Walton foundations among others. Here are the chapter titles:

1. What I Learned About School Reform
2. Hijacked! How the Standards Movement Turned Into the Testing Movement
3. The Transformation of (New York) District 2
4. Lessons from San Diego
5. The Business Model in New York City
6. NCLB: Measure and Punish
7. Choice: The Story of an Idea
8. The Trouble with Accountability
9. What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?
10. The Billionaire Boys Club
11. Lessons Learned

What about standards? Ravitch still believes that "high academic standards" are the panacea. The "hijacking" of the standards movement (Chapter 2) began in the mid-1990s when, she tells us, "the standards movement fell apart" and the testing-and-accountability juggernaut began. Particular scenes in that drama are well known to the readers of *Social Education*, such as the January 1995 U.S. Senate vote to condemn the voluntary national standards for history after Lynne Cheney and Rush Limbaugh led the attack. Thereafter, probably in order to avoid such conflict, most states developed vague standards, which Ravitch abhors. But these and other details of the demise of the national standards movement are aimed, in her story, at reviving the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. The chapter ends, "These recommendations were sound in 1983. They are sound today." (30)

I, too, want high academic standards (i.e., a liberal arts education; balanced and deep learning in the arts and sciences). I believe they are key, but not the panacea. They are a core dimension of any serious effort to improve the quality of American education. Broadening students' horizons; giving them access to mind-altering texts, ideas, and values; sending them on the adventures of history, literature, and biology; engaging them in discussions of pressing public issues—this is fundamental and generative. And this needs to be said because “school reformers” so easily overlook the curriculum. But needed in tandem is a redoubled effort to give all children access to this kind of education. This, too, is easily overlooked, and Ravitch herself still underplays it. As educators have long understood, opportunity-to-learn standards are needed alongside academic standards.<sup>5</sup>

I'll close with this. In her shared Education Week blog with progressive educator Deborah Meier, “Bridging Differences,” Ravitch wrote: “My hope for the book is that it will provoke a counteroffensive against misguided policies ... now embedded in No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top.” (March 2, 2010, ¶ 5) What she still may not grasp is that the school crisis she has imagined, the idea of a horribly broken public school system, is both an exaggeration and an oversimplification. This “device” has been nurtured by many things, not the least of which today are a bad habit of misinterpreting international test scores and a determination, in some quarters, to break up and marketize the public school system. There is an element of truth in the crisis narrative, of course; our education system certainly could be better in many crucial ways: curriculum, instruction, student achievement, equity, financing, respect for teachers, and more. But in the 27 years that have followed *A Nation at Risk*, and despite its dire prognosis, the United States' economy has soared, and its schools and colleges

have produced the “lion's share of the world's best students.”<sup>6</sup> As Yong Zhao notes, Chinese schools are trying to become more like ours, not less.<sup>7</sup>

The broken-schools device doesn't help the quest to improve schools. The “solutions” it spawns are overwrought with urgency and distraction, red herrings and silver bullets. Without this understanding—on the ground, not at 20,000 feet—that the crisis-and-salvation narrative doesn't serve school reform, Ravitch's tenacious search for a fix may again worsen the problem she is trying to solve. She trumpets her “skepticism about pedagogical fads, enthusiasms, and movements,” (2) but she got caught up in one of the biggest of all time. Still, she has written a sincere *mea culpa*. Admirably, she tells us that she took John Maynard Keynes' advice: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”(2) 🌐

WALTER PARKER is professor of social studies education and, by courtesy, political science at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the editor of the Research and Practice section of Social Education.

#### Notes

1. G. W. Bracey, *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs. Reality* (Alexandria, Va.: Educational Research Service, 2009), 39.
2. W. N. Grubb & M. Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: the Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). Also D. Tyack, & L. Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
3. C. Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 73-93.
4. L. A. Cremin, *Popular Education and its Discontents* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 103. Also D. C. Berliner & B. J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995); and G. Glass, *Fertilizers, Pills and Magnetic Strips: the Fate of Public Education in America* (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2008).
5. For example, K. H. Au & S. W. Valencia, “Fulfilling the Potential of Standards-based Education: Promising Policy Principles,” *Language Arts*, in press.
6. H. Salzman & L. Lowell, “Making the Grade,” *Nature* 453 (May 1, 2008), 28-30.
7. Y. Zhou, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009).

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