

Diane Ravitch's The Death and Life of the Great American School System

An insider's critique of education "reform"

Walter Gilberti, Jerry White
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The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education by *Diane Ravitch*, *Basic Books*: 284 pp.

It is rare to find a book that provides a detailed picture of the wrecking job that has been carried out against the public education system in the US over the last three decades in the name of "school reform." Diane Ravitch's book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, presents a summary of the assault waged by both Democratic and Republican parties against public education, from its origins during the Reagan era to the Obama's administration's Race to the Top.

Because of its well-informed exposures, her latest work has been read widely by teachers in the US and other countries and became a best seller a month after its release in March 2010.

A 1975 graduate of Columbia University with a PhD in the history of American public education, Ravitch is the author of more than 20 books on the subject. Her particular insights into the attack on public education, however, stem from the fact that for much of the last 20 years she was a prominent supporter of "teacher accountability," "school choice," merit pay and other free-market nostrums she now criticizes for destroying public education.

In 1991 Ravitch, a registered Democrat, was appointed by President George H.W. Bush as US assistant secretary of education under Republican Education Secretary Lamar Alexander, a proponent of school vouchers. Afterward she worked for right-wing think tanks promoting free-market proposals for public education, including the Hoover Institution, before being appointed to the Clinton administration's National Assessment Governing Board, where she served between 1997 and 2004. By her own admission, as recently as 2006 she maintained support for the reactionary No Child Left Behind Act, sponsored by the second Bush administration, and passed by Congress in 2001 with overwhelming Democratic Party support.

In her book Ravitch pays particular tribute to former American Federation of Teachers president, Albert Shanker, a leading anti-communist trade union official in the AFL-CIO, and notes that she traveled on behalf of the AFT to Poland and other Eastern European in 1989-90, at a time when the union was working with the US State Department to push for the restoration of capitalism in those countries. She is currently director of the Albert Shanker Institute.

"With the collapse of communism and the triumph of market reforms in most parts of the world," she writes in the opening chapter of her book, "it did not seem much of a stretch to envision the application of the market model to schooling. Like many others in that era, I was attracted to the idea that the market would unleash innovation and bring greater efficiencies to education."

Ravitch's rethinking of this view appears to be bound up with a growing

concern by more astute sections of the political establishment that the dismantling of public education and its handover to the most rapacious corporate interests are incompatible with maintaining even the pretense of a democratic society.

In a March 2010 op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled, "Why I Changed My Mind About School Reform," Ravitch expresses concern that the destruction of public education is undermining social cohesion in America. "The Obama administration seems to think that schools will improve if we fire teachers and close schools," she wrote. "They do not recognize that schools are often the anchor of their communities, representing values, traditions and ideals that have persevered across decades."

Shortly after Obama took office, in April 2009, Ravitch quit the Hoover Institution, writing in the book of her disappointment that the Democrats were advancing educational policies "that had been the exclusive property of the conservative wing of the Republican Party since Ronald Reagan's presidency." She also notes "at the very time that the financial markets were collapsing, and as deregulation of financial markets got a bad name, many of the leading voices in American education assured the public that the way to educational rejuvenation was through deregulation."

It is presumably with the hope that she could persuade the new administration to change course that Ravitch embarked on her revealing portrait of the bipartisan assault on public education.

Towards the beginning of the book, Ravitch attempts to locate the shift in government policy against public education. In 1983, she notes, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a group formed under the Reagan administration, published *A Nation at Risk*. This report blamed the "mediocrity" of the public schools for the failure of US corporations to compete with their Japanese and European rivals.

Ravitch explains, however, that the document, far from advocating school closures, privatization, charter schools, vouchers or market-based education reforms, simply warned that there had been a steady erosion of the content of education.

Ravitch compares this document, the *alpha* so to speak of education reform, to the *omega*, No Child Left Behind, correctly characterizing the latter as devoid of any new or educationally sound ideas; promoting instead "a cramped, mechanistic and profoundly anti-intellectual definition of education. In the age of NCLB, knowledge was irrelevant."

But while Ravitch's comparison of *A Nation at Risk* to NCLB is correct as far as it goes, she soft-pedals the former's significance—arguing that the good intentions of the report's authors were later hijacked. Placed in its proper context, *A Nation at Risk* was a shot across the bow of public education. It represented one side of the Reagan administration's overall offensive against the democratic rights and living standards of the working class, initiated with the firing of striking air traffic controllers and the destruction of their union, PATCO, in 1981.

Ravitch fails to explain why—after nearly two centuries in which the reach of public education was brought to ever broader layers of the population as a result of mass social struggles—the American ruling class in the 1980s abruptly reversed course and began a sustained attack, which continues to this day, to dismantle the right to universal, free public education.

The rise of the educational “reformers”

Ravitch is at her best when she chronicles the destructive effects of a string of education policies advanced by an array of self-styled reformers, “visionaries” and, more recently, billionaire philanthropists. By the early 1990s the movement for “schools of choice” was well under way, fueled by the idea that vouchers should be given to families whose children are “trapped” in failing schools. The money for these vouchers would be taken from the public schools themselves, thus leading to the further erosion of public education.

Ravitch exposes the interesting evolutionary lineage linking “schools of choice,” vouchers and charter schools with their common ancestor, in the form of the “segregation academies” constructed in the Deep South to oppose federally mandated school desegregation in the 1950s. She writes: “When the federal government and the federal courts began compelling segregated districts to reassign black and white pupils to integrated schools, public officials in some southern states embraced a new form of choice. They encouraged the creation of private schools to accommodate white students who did not want to attend an integrated school.”

In 1955, this movement was given official benediction by the right-wing economist Milton Friedman in his essay, “The Role of Government in Education,” which is really the ideological progenitor of the “school reform” movement. Ravitch makes the point that nearly 50 years after its publication, “almost everyone who supports school vouchers and school choice is familiar with Friedman’s essay.”

In it Friedman outlined the free-market notion that competition should be introduced in education—which he considered a bastion of egalitarian socialism in America—and that the role of government is to provide the money to insure that parents can send their children to any school they choose, even to for-profit enterprises and religious schools. Ravitch points out the cynicism of those who sought political leverage for vouchers by targeting low income and inner-city families, citing the “achievement gap” with their suburban counterparts.

Following on the heels of the schools of choice movement, the idea that the problem with public education lay with school governance emerged during the Clinton administration. Systemic school “reform” became the buzz phrase, and drastic changes in the way school districts were run, with the emphasis on “accountability,” were instituted.

The primary focus of the governance movement was to establish a rigid business-like hierarchy, which allowed administrators to punish teachers and administrators; exhorting, threatening and scrutinizing them, all with the aim of increasing standardized test scores. Ravitch is scathing in her treatment of these attempts, and gives a detailed account of their alleged successes, as well as their demonstrable failures, first in New York City, then in San Diego, California.

Ravitch describes in considerable detail the “Children First” program in New York City’s public schools, launched by billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and how his subsequent claims of success conveniently overlooked the fact the many of the neighborhoods had been gentrified; their schools serving few, if any, low-income or at-risk children.

She documents several examples of how officials, including former Chicago Schools CEO Arne Duncan, cooked the books on test scores to

show the “success” of their policies. This included lowering the threshold for passing grades, instructing teachers to teach to the tests, encouraging principals to suspend or send home low-performing students before the test, cheating by getting the exams in advance, etc.

In Washington DC, Michelle Rhee was promoted by the “reform” advocates in the federal government to head the public schools there. Rhee was a graduate of “Teach For America,” (TFA) a kind of domestic Peace Corps designed to introduce “new blood” in the form of young, idealistic, as well as predominantly Ivy League college graduates, and place them in inner city schools districts.

TFA gained prominence in the 1990s as the “reform” groups claimed that poverty and conditions in the schools were unimportant compared to teacher “quality,” while at the same time questioning the traditional measure of quality, professional teacher training requirements. Despite the fanfare, however, most TFA teachers, some 80 percent, were gone by the third or fourth year of employment.

Ravitch quotes Rhee’s assertion that teachers should be able to overcome poverty and other disadvantages students face without an additional dime to improve their schools or the children’s lives outside the classrooms: “Those kids, where they lived didn’t change. Their parents didn’t change. Their diets didn’t change. The violence in the community didn’t change. The only thing that changed ... was the adults who were in front of them every single day teaching them.”

Rhee also denounced “adult interests,” i.e., the preservation of job security, decent working conditions and living standards by teachers, as the chief threat to “children’s interests.” This was a repeat of the long-standing right-wing claim that teachers unions were the biggest obstacle to innovation.

Ravitch, who counts American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten as a close associate, is a defender of the teachers unions and argues that these organizations actually defend the interests of their members. Her argument against the proponents of the right-wing attack on teachers is colored by that perspective. Actually, the salient issues here are the rights that teachers as workers have won over the years, and the unions, far from defending these achievements, have collaborated with the government to destroy them.

The main slogan of the AFT is “school reform with us, not against us.” On this basis, the AFT and the National Education Association have blocked any struggle by teachers against Obama and Duncan and sanctioned the destruction of jobs, pay and benefits and working conditions. In many cases the unions have set up charter schools—a proposal first made by Albert Shanker himself—and now oversee the hiring and firing of their own members.

Foundations run roughshod over democracy

In chapter 10 of her book, “The Billionaire Boys Club,” Ravitch discusses the insidious role that big capitalists are currently playing, by inserting themselves into the education process through the seemingly bottomless pockets of their philanthropic foundations.

Ravitch mentions a few of these repositories (and tax shelters) for vast fortunes: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Eli and Edith Broad Foundation. She characterizes them as “venture foundations” because unlike others that bestow their gifts to intermediate organizations to use as they see fit, these foundations view their endowments as an investment, from which they are seeking a return, in this case in the form of the realization of their education agendas.

Ravitch explains that there is something profoundly undemocratic about

their role in education. The foundations, she says, “are not subject to public oversight and review, as a public agency would be. They have taken it upon themselves to reform public education, perhaps in ways that would never survive the scrutiny of voters in any district or state ... The foundations demand that public schools and teachers be held accountable for performance, but they themselves are accountable to no one. If their plans fail, no sanctions are levied against them. They are bastions of unaccountable power.”

Ravitch notes that big foundations channeled large sums of money into the Chicago schools when Arne Duncan ran them. In return, Duncan appointed a high-level official from the Gates Foundation to serve as his chief of staff at the US Department of Education and sent him around the country urging mayors to take control of their public schools. Obama’s Race to the Top initiative, which uses federal funding to blackmail states into lifting caps on charter schools and merit pay, was designed by Joanne S. Weiss, another “education entrepreneur” who runs a charter school management company with James H. Shelton III. Shelton, a former program officer for the Gates Foundation, was appointed by Duncan to oversee the \$650 million “Invest in What Works and Innovation Fund.”

Ravitch points out that all the reform initiatives, like the setting up small learning communities, and schools within schools; all the attempts to impose the business model on education; all the invocations of choice and the demands for accountability have failed to improve the education of children. The “successes” they have scored are chiefly at schools that exclude special education, children whose first language is not English, and other students who require the most resources—in other words, schools that cannot be defined in any serious sense as “public.”

It is as if an incompetent scientist devised an experiment, in which all the extraneous variables that could possibly contaminate the results are ignored. The notion that excellent schools can be created amidst social and economic devastation; that all the current social problems symptomatic of a deeply diseased social order—chronic mass unemployment, poverty, social dissolution, cultural decline, decaying infrastructure; the social and economic context within which many urban schools are embedded—are considered to be besides the point.

Ravitch can identify problems, like the retrograde demands for vouchers and “schools of choice,” the arrogant and punitive demands for accountability, the reckless district reorganizations, the stultifyingly narrow conceptions of what constitutes proficiency, and the stupid obsession with standardized tests. She critiques these with thoroughness and gusto, but can offer no coherent explanation for the onset of these policies or where the solution lies.

In the end she can do no more than appeal to the powers that be to insitute a well-rounded curriculum, drop the fixation with free-market solutions and renew America’s past “commitment to public education.” She longs for a return to yesterday. But the “yesterday” of American capitalism, which once promoted the progressive idea that a truly democratic society required an informed populace, has long passed.

As a longtime opponent of socialism, Ravitch cannot come to grips with the fact that the intractable problems besetting education cannot be resolved within the framework of the defense of the capitalist profit system, whose crisis is the driving force of the crisis in the education system as such. Teachers, parents and students who are looking for a way forward to defend public education, as well as the right to be educated, should mark well her criticisms. But she offers no solution, since that lies elsewhere, in the adoption and implementation of a socialist perspective and program.





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