

# A damning exposure of the assault on public education in the US

## Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools

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*Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* by Diane Ravitch (Alfred A. Knopf, Borzoi Books, 2013, 396 pp.)

If the *World Socialist Web Site* had not already coined the term “social counterrevolution,” it would be necessary to do so when surveying the fate of the American public school system.

A staggering change has swept over the United States.

The struggle for an equal and high quality educational system took center stage in American life for many decades. The historic Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the expansion of public education during the Great Society years and the dramatic increase in college accessibility after 1965 provided tremendous hope for the future in the minds of millions. The vast human potential to develop science, technology, art and culture was in the air.

While this phenomenon was bound up with a temporary retreat before the struggles of the working class and Cold War geopolitical considerations—and would soon face reversal alongside the US debacle in Vietnam—it was nevertheless a deeply felt aspiration throughout broad swathes of society.

Today, public education lies in tatters, an openly class-based system. Corporate vultures and their politicians are proceeding apace to cash in on the growing education marketplace. Sixty years after *Brown*, segregated schools have increasingly become the norm again, public school districts are being starved of funding and the costs of college have become an interminable nightmare for massively indebted students and their families.

Diane Ravitch's latest best-seller, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, takes a look at the terrible social retrogression in K-12 education. The volume updates her 2011 book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, and traces the “transformation of a movement for testing and accountability” into a drive for outright privatization of education spearheaded by the Obama administration.

The book is worth reading. A historian of education and a research professor at New York University, Ravitch has spent a lifetime studying and writing about the history of education in the US.

Her political biography, moreover, gives her particular insight into the attack on education. In the 1990s, she was a corporate “reform” and “school choice” advocate, serving as assistant secretary of education under George H.W. Bush's federal push for national educational standards. She served another seven years in the Clinton administration as a member of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal testing program. By the end of the decade, however, she famously rethought her views and repudiated the right-wing corporate “reform”

outlook, vociferously denouncing her previous support to No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

As a political insider as well as an academic, the author knows her subject matter well. At the same time, she refuses to draw any conclusions that interfere with her support to the trade union apparatus and the Democratic Party—and, above all, the capitalist profit system. This leads her to advance conformist “solutions,” which can go nowhere.

*Reign of Error* indicts the educational policies of every US president, Democrat and Republican, since Ronald Reagan and the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the event associated with the launching of the corporate “reform” movement. She points to the perpetual renewal of a “narrative of crisis” in American schools and sees its most recent incarnation as a propaganda campaign by right-wing organizations such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), funded by major corporations, to destabilize and destroy public education in the interest of profit-making concerns.

Ravitch argues passionately, and corroborates with statistics, that the real problem in the American educational system is not test scores, teachers or curricula, but the terrible growth of poverty. Here she finds herself repeatedly attacking the political premises and politics of both the Republicans and Democrats, and specifically the Obama administration.

In the section “The Facts About the Achievement Gap,” for example, Ravitch rejects the administration's claim that the “single most important” element in a child's learning is their teacher, pointing to the well-known role of family income and education. She cites a recent Stanford study showing that the income achievement gap has been growing for at least 50 years, with the current gap 30-40 percent larger for children born in 2001 than for those born 25 years earlier. The study found that income gap is now twice as large as the black-white achievement gap. These types of statistics are rarely, if ever, found in the American media reports on the crisis of schools.

She reviews in detail other *au courant* fads and fallacies including “value-added metrics” for education, merit pay, the parent-trigger, the role of big data and the ever-malleable “declining test scores.”

The book is particularly pointed in detailing how the financial industry is cashing in on education. Not only does it not pull any punches when it comes to the Obama administration, she asserts that the opening up of the lucrative education market was **the primary intention** of Obama's educational policy.

Ravitch quotes Joanne Weiss, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's chief of staff, previously the chief operating officer at NewSchools Venture Fund. She states that Obama's signature education initiative Race to the Top (RTTT) “was designed to scale up entrepreneurial activity, to

encourage the creation of new markets for both for-profit and nonprofit investors.”

She says this trend is escalating dramatically as a result of the widespread implementation (in line with RTTT requirements) of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This, she describes in a recent blog, amounted to “an educational coup” made possible by “the close relationship between the Gates Foundation and the Obama administration.” The administration designed a special contest using economic stimulus funds to reward states that accepted the standards.

*Reign of Error* projects the cost of CCSS to cash-strapped states to be as much as a whopping \$16 billion. Among the most well-heeled beneficiaries of the program are the mega-publishing/testing/curricula developer conglomerate Pearson and Wireless Generation, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. (See the recent *Washington Post* article detailing both Gates’ bankrolling of the creation of CCSS and its marketing campaign, which cost \$200 million alone. The article notes that the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association were major recipients of this funding).

Siphoning off taxpayer dollars for education alongside big business are, of course, the banks and hedge funds, which point to education as an “emerging market” worth an estimated \$500 billion annually. Ravitch notes the existence of one such group, the Democrats for Education Reform. The organization is comprised of hedge fund managers who back the charter school movement and assorted “accountability” efforts. DFER’s first meeting in 2005 was addressed, Ravitch points out, by Illinois Senator Barack Obama. Indicative of its influence, the DFER recommended Arne Duncan—then the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools—for US Secretary of Education in the incoming administration.

Wall Street’s embrace of the charter school model is documented in *Reign of Error*, which examines the various ways that these unregulated entities create profit opportunities. Noting that the first federal government program to support charters was developed by President Bill Clinton, Ravitch points out they received \$100 million in funding under George W. Bush, and expanded even further under Obama’s RTTT, a competition offering \$4.3 billion in aid only to those states that lifted their caps on charters.

In addition to direct funding of charters, the federal government also now provides tax breaks to encourage banks and individuals to invest in charter school construction. For example, the Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000 includes a credit allowing investors in charter school construction to collect a “safe and reliable return of 39% over seven years.” Real estate investment trusts have joined the bandwagon. Ravitch cites the statement of David Brain, head of the \$3 billion Entertainment Properties Trust, pointing to the development of 500 charter schools a year as a “\$2.5 billion opportunity.”

Ravitch details the growth of the for-profit model of charter school, now most dominant in Michigan, and the use of education management organizations (EMOs) to skim off large portions of taxpayers’ money even when the school is purportedly not-for-profit. At the time of writing the book there were about 200 different EMOs operating in 28 states. She emphasizes that charter schools are deregulated and free from most state laws other than those governing health and safety. In Louisiana, the author states, the deregulation is so extreme that even teacher certification is not required.

The chapter “Trouble in E-land” is a good look at the growth of virtual charter schools and the mushrooming of this, the most rapacious for-profit sector of education. She documents how “education technology companies, Wall Street equity funds, and school choice advocates combined to promote online schooling.”

In sum, Ravitch scathingly characterizes the net effect of NCLB and RTTT—of Bush and Obama—as a retrograde “redefinition” of the entire education landscape in the US. This is exactly on point. But what does she

make of it?

Ravitch’s history and experience provide her with a certain insight, but they are also the source of her fatal limitation as a critic. She speaks to the rise of poverty, social inequality and the predations of the moneyed elite as the fundamental source of the problem but refuses to ever consider the root cause of these phenomena—the capitalist profit system.

The author says *Reign of Error* was intended to address the criticism that her previous volume was “short on answers.” To this point, she spends a significant amount of time making the case for such elemental necessities as prenatal care for every pregnant woman, universal high-quality preschool, universal immunizations, reduction of class sizes and ending poverty. But the clear message—despite her detailed enumeration of the bipartisan assault on education—is that “grassroots” pressure can bring forward the right bourgeois candidate to address these needs.

Such futile efforts have led her time and again to contradict the clear meaning of her own devastating exposures and to undermine their seriousness. Despite Obama’s full-throated embrace of corporate “reform” and his obvious opposition to all the above policies, Ravitch pressed him repeatedly to “change course”. She questioned “whether President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and Congress will hear their [teachers’] message” about equitable funding of public schools and an end to high-stakes testing, as if the answer weren’t already clear. *Reign of Error* evinces her bitter disappointment that Obama “doubled down” on the now-infamous NCLB, enthusiastically validating vouchers, charters, privatization and CCSS. Yet she endorsed him for re-election in 2012—a fact conveniently omitted in the book .

The author’s record amounts to not just one, but a string of endorsements for the liberal “flavor of the day” capitalist politician ...yesterday Obama, today New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio or California Governor Jerry Brown. She never anticipates or takes responsibility for their inevitable attacks on education and the working class.

So why does Ravitch choose to wear political blinders? The author’s allegiance to the legacy of former American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker—who she favorably mentions several times in *Reign of Error*—speaks volumes about her politics. Shanker was a rabid anticommunist, notorious for his hardline support for the Vietnam War and CIA subversion campaigns around the world. His policies domestically, in line with the AFL-CIO in general, were just as pro-capitalist. In 1983, Shanker shocked teachers by endorsing *A Nation at Risk*.

Formerly a board member of the Albert Shanker Institute, Ravitch counts as her “good friend” AFT President Randi Weingarten, who recently travelled to Kiev, lending her support to the Western-backed fascist-led coup that installed an anti-Russian government in Ukraine. In the US, Weingarten, a fervent supporter of Obama and the Democrats, has collaborated with Gates and other enemies of public education while suppressing the struggles of teachers, parents and students against school closings and other attacks.

Far from opposing the corporate restructuring of public education Weingarten and the other highly paid executives who run the teachers unions only want to be included in the process. This is encapsulated in the AFT slogan, “School reform with us, not against us.”

*Reign of Error* whitewashes the betrayal of the Chicago teachers’ strike in 2012, ignoring the fact that Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis called off the struggle right at the point when it threatened to expand into a wider political movement against Obama’s war on public education. The betrayal paved the way for the shutting of scores of schools and the destruction of thousands of teachers’ jobs in Chicago, inspiring Democratic mayors in Philadelphia, Washington DC and other cities to follow suit.

In other words, Ravitch is aligned with the very same forces that are

aiding and abetting the corporate-political attack on public education. A fervent opponent of socialism, she advances a perspective that is nothing more than a political trap to keep teachers and other workers tied to the Democratic Party, the trade unions and the profit system they serve.

*Reign of Error* fails to answer why the destruction of public education has become the consensus policy over the last three decades, regardless of whether a Democrat or Republican occupies the White House.

The fact that this is the case—and moreover, that the attack on education is occurring around the globe—shows that the answer lies not simply in the decisions of this or that politician or political party but far more objective causes.

Under conditions of a decades-long economic decline and growth of unprecedented levels of social inequality, the corporate and financial elite sees the continued funding of public education—for a generation of young people who will be largely condemned to a future of unemployment, low-paying jobs and war—as an intolerable burden it will no longer bear.

The democratic and egalitarian principle embodied in public education—that every human being, regardless of socio-economic background, can learn and has the inalienable right to high-quality education—is incompatible with the staggering levels of social inequality produced by capitalism. The vast improvement of public education, the elimination of poverty and other social ills, will not be achieved by appealing to the powers-that-be but only through abolishing the profit system and freeing up the resources necessary to raise the material and cultural level of society as a whole.

That is the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the damning exposures contained in this book.



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