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## The Death and Life of the Great American School System By Diane Ravitch

Chris Ohana  
Western Washington University, [Chris.Ohana@wwu.edu](mailto:Chris.Ohana@wwu.edu)

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*

By Ravitch, D. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010.

Reviewed by Chris Ohana, Ph.D.  
Western Washington University

Cleaning your office can be a surprisingly cathartic experience. Diane Ravitch, once a darling in the Bush administrations, was preparing her office to be painted. As she sifted through decades of work, she experienced what she called an intellectual crisis. She began to doubt more than just the impact of various reforms that she had once embraced. She also challenged the very assumptions on which they were based. The result of this cleaning crisis was her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

Ironically, Ravitch started her career as a skeptic of reform efforts that were often both utopian and naïve. The disappointing results of many curricular efforts led her to an interest in the design of rigorous curriculum. Her work with social studies standards in California drew attention from Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander and led to a role for her in the elder Bush administration. Initially her work centered on developing voluntary national curriculum standards. But she gradually evolved to support a bevy of reforms that were based on hunches and beliefs that were removed from the ground-level realities of schools. She began to “see like a state” (p. 11). Eventually, though, she became less enamored of the market movement promoted by colleagues such as Chubb and Moe at the Hoover Institute. She took a long hard look and realized that the evidence for a market-based system was weak, radical, and lacked what it proposed to value most: accountability. Ravitch describes how a movement that started with an intention of world-class standards led to testing, which begat accountability, which begat testing, and then begat sanctions. This fed an appetite for privatizing schools, because, the argument goes, parents should be able to choose a private or charter school instead of a failing neighborhood school. Accountability led some to argue for a market-based system.

These themes are familiar for those who have been on the defensive—teacher preparation programs, teachers’ unions, critics of charter schools and vouchers, and No Child Left Behind. We already know what she tells us. What she adds in this book is a well-researched and well-written narrative. She adds the power of inside stories and her own drift away from her core beliefs to embrace market-driven solutions and then her journey back.

This book deserves to be examined on several levels. First, it is a compelling and accessible review of the research on the assumptions and effectiveness of neo-conservative school reforms. Ravitch also offers insight about the tendency, when flattered by smart people with power, to take on their ideas. But perhaps the most important reason to read this book is to witness a rarity: someone in education who admits she was wrong. Ravitch wrote this volume partly as penance and partly as a cautionary tale: We can’t immunize ourselves against fads in education unless we know how we become susceptible to them.

***“For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”***

(attributed to [H. L. Mencken](#))

How did Ravitch come to subscribe to a set of beliefs that contradicted her initial approach to education? Part of the attraction, she admits, was that, at the Department of Education and later at the Hoover Institute, she was surrounded by smart people who were committed to untested and bold structural changes in schools. She was also eager for new ideas out of frustration at the glacially slow change in schools that many historians have described. As Ravitch began to view complex education issues from the high altitude of her fellow policy-makers, schools and teachers resembled chess pieces that could be manipulated *en masse*. This made her embrace the “latest panaceas and miracle cures” (p 3). I fully understand this conversion. As a new teacher in Oakland public schools in the 1980s, I became increasingly frustrated by a politicized school board, incompetent administrators, and an abundance of de-moralized teachers. I became desperate. Decentralize schools. Blow them up. Charter schools looked especially attractive because they promised to become beacons of teacher-led reform that freed teachers from the constant meddling and bureaucratic strangulation that obstructed teaching and learning. I understand Ravitch’s shifting beliefs because I stood on the same shaky ground. Charter schools became my simple solution to a complex problem.

After an introductory chapter that sets the scene, Ravitch traces the history of the standards movement with an emphasis on her passion—social science standards. She is scathing in her description of most state standards. She rightly claims that

most states have nebulous standards without explicit expectations about what content students should know. The federal government, lacking any constitutional authority to establish standards, allocated money to the states and other professional organizations to write their own standards. In the state of Washington, as in most others, standards were created by committees of teachers, administrators, and state education bureaucrats who lack formal training in writing and assessing content standards.

The standards movement, according to Ravitch, began with good intentions, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). While acknowledging differing opinions of this report, she writes that it was an “impassioned plea” (p. 43) to attend to quality in United States’ schools. Though commissioned by the Reagan administration, it did not call for privatizing schools, vouchers, school prayer, or any of the other pet policies of the Reagan era. It called for vigorous, robust teaching and learning. Ravitch contrasts *A Nation At Risk* with *No Child Left Behind*. While *No Child Left Behind* concentrates on basic skills narrowly assessed by high-stakes tests with punitive consequences, *A Nation At Risk* pleaded for a quality education for all children. Ravitch’s description of *A Nation at Risk* contradicted many people’s experiences with that volume, including mine. Many of us see it as the harbinger for the market-based reforms that live today. The explosive hyperbole of *A Nation at Risk*, conjuring images of war and economic decay, fueled a fire in the bellies of policy-makers to improve education with an increasing role of the federal government. That led to a focus on improving education, but possibly for the wrong reasons. While I don’t share Ravitch’s enthusiasm for *A Nation at Risk*, in the spirit of admitting a possibility of being wrong, it has prompted me to look for my old copy. It may be that *A Nation at Risk* was not a culprit in the sequence of events that led us to where we are now, but rather its interpretation led to superficial and naïve remedies.

Ravitch devotes three chapters to case studies of large urban districts (New York City and San Diego). District 2 in New York had been touted by several prominent education researchers, including Lauren Resnick and Dick Elmore, as the model for scaling up reforms targeted at improving test scores. District 2 administrators rigidly pushed specific pedagogies and curricula in math and literacy. Teachers were micromanaged to make sure the curricula were followed with complete fidelity. The rewards were impressive gains on state achievement tests, and District 2 became a poster child for reform. But it turns out that the gains were not as impressive as first thought. In the 1990s, the demographics of the district changed. While the district started with a higher SES than most of the other NY districts, the white and affluent segment grew dramatically in the 1990s, as neighborhoods like Tribeca became gentrified. The creation of a series of charter schools also recruited middle- and upper-class students back into the public school system. What had been promoted as a superior reform model for the rest of the country became a scene of shifting demographics, new curriculum, focused professional development, and required instructional practices. While all of the achievement gains may not be attributed to the changing SES, Ravitch claims it was probably a major contributor. Ravitch doesn’t make this case directly, but the tasks of careful research and dissemination cannot be missed. It is tempting to attribute most of the gains to a changing demographic, but what that may also miss are reforms that could have made a difference. The curricula chosen by District 2 were progressive and research-based. Did they have an impact? Since so many variables were at play, it is impossible to know.

The publicity around the “miracle” of District 2 led to the San Diego school district’s attempt to replicate it. San Diego brought in the same people with a similar agenda, but it became a nightmare from which the district is still trying to recover. The reformers required strict adherence to required pedagogy and curricula. Teaching in San Diego became similar to descriptions of life in North Korea. Dissent was not allowed, and principals and teachers were fired for daring to complain or disagree.

Despite the failure of the District 2 model in San Diego, it was given new life by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the first decade of this century. He engineered a series of re-organizations of the school system and hired non-educators to fill most top administrative positions. “Because accountability was restricted only to reading and mathematics, there was little reason for elementary and middle schools to pay much attention to subjects that didn’t count, such as the arts, physical education, science, history and civics” (p.76). Initially Ravitch supported the city take-over but became alarmed at the resulting overly centralized, autocratic system. Both parents and teachers were disenfranchised from decisions about their public schools.

Some support for the reforms was seen in the dramatic decline of the number of students scoring at the lowest level on state tests. Unfortunately, the dramatic decline actually represented a major change in scoring. In 2006, students needed 41% of the points to score a 2. In 2007, students needed just 17%. Obviously, the number of students passing seemed to skyrocket.

Another strategy in New York was to open charter schools, and charter school funding and space became priorities. The success of these schools on tests was touted as proof of their superiority. But critics point out that charter schools, often

subsidized by philanthropic funds, had smaller classes and more resources. They also had control over admissions, often rejecting at-risk students or students requiring resources from special education. Ravitch points out that, "As it elevated the concept of school choice, the Department of Education [in NYC] destroyed the concept of neighborhood high schools" (p. 117).

The case studies described by Ravitch are immensely frustrating. The most frustrating piece is the misuse of educational research. Research was censored and filtered in different ways for different reasons. Sometimes there was personal investment. Sometimes there was political pressure. Sometimes a rosy picture was painted simply because someone believed it should be so. In many ways this goes to the heart of her book. We need to be able to admit when we are wrong and search for other viable answers.

### ***The scores, the scores, the scores...***

A recent news piece (Hobbs, 2011) describes a common scene in elementary schools across the country. The only surprise is that it received press coverage. Under the pressure of raising reading and math scores, a principal at a Dallas elementary school directed teachers to ignore science, social studies and the arts. Instead, because these are the only required subjects for testing, the teachers focused every hour of every day on teaching reading and math. Even the music teacher taught math. The test scores went up, and the school was labeled as exemplary. What caught the attention of the press was that this school gave grades for the subjects that weren't taught. A parent commented, "It was an extreme focus, but not in a way that would be beneficial. I got called in and asked, 'Why aren't you pushing him more at home?' She made me feel like I was a horrible parent. It was all about the scores, the scores, the scores" (Hobbs). The focus on a narrow set of test scores also narrows the curriculum. I have been told directly by a local principal, that *his kids* (meaning kids in a high poverty school) do not need science. Many share his attitude. In the state of Washington, surveys suggest that fewer than half of the elementary teachers teach science. Why? Because science, social studies and the arts are being sacrificed at the altar of higher reading and math scores.

This corruption is predictable. Ravitch describes work by Rothstein, Jacobson and Wilder, who note that "attempts to build accountability systems on quantitative measures alone, whether in health care, labor policy, criminal justice, or the private sector, have been similarly corrupted" (2008, p. 142). For example, when New York graded physicians based on cardiac outcomes, physicians started creatively coding many minor ailments as *cardiac*, thus improving their percentage of positive cardiac outcomes. Researchers at the University of Florida found that the "introduction of high-stakes testing to improve school accountability has apparently led these schools to disproportionately punish low-performing students during the testing period to try to 'game the system'" (*University of Florida News*, 2006). These researchers further report that sometimes students who will bring down school averages are suspended during testing. Ravitch documents similar creative, but destructive and dishonest, attempts to raise test scores. One popular tactic is to revise the cut scores on standardized tests, which represent the levels needed for passing. She describes how our current secretary of the Department of Education, Arne Duncan, created a name for himself by leading Chicago schools to unprecedented gains on state test scores. But it was rarely noted that the improved test scores were simply a result of lowering the cut scores.

At the end of such an impassioned explosion of market-based education myths, I had anticipated an equally considered and thoughtful treatise on what steps we need to take. Instead, the final chapter, "Lessons Learned," seemed full of empty calories, a generic Camelot with a rich curriculum and accomplished teachers that left me hungry for more. If these market-based approaches aren't working, how do we mobilize to work for something different? How do we organize around changing the attitudes and knowledge of policy-makers and the public? Ravitch offers a few examples of her vision, including the state system of Massachusetts. But while she lauds their curriculum and goals, we don't have a clue about how they got there. What structures, values, and conditions need to be in place so that we can mimic the high expectations and performance of Massachusetts?

Either in religion or politics or 12-step programs, there is nothing more powerful than a tale of someone who went down the wrong path but emerges stronger and better than before. This is such a story of a prodigal professor who strays from her commitment to public schools organized around a public good to a system based on rote skills, accountability and punishment. Although it is a compelling read,

I wanted to know more about why she joined the bandwagon for more accountability and market-based structures. And then, I wanted to know more about why she abandoned them.

But this book still deserves to be read at several different levels, of which the first, and most obvious, is a review of the failure of most of the market-based reform efforts of the last twenty years. That is certainly the theme that has caught the

attention of most reviewers and the press. But there are several, perhaps even more powerful lessons from Ravitch.

One lesson still yet to be learned is why educators are on the defensive. Even with the most liberal president in a generation, schools, teachers, and colleges of education are on the defensive. Obama chose a poseur from Chicago over Linda Darling-Hammond for Secretary of Education. Obama is pushing essentially the same ill-considered and ineffective education policies of the previous Bush administration. Why is this a continued theme of national policy?

Perhaps the most powerful level on which to read this volume is to examine our abilities to admit errors. Do you have doubt? Do you have unflinching convictions? Ravitch spends a scant piece of the first chapter asking, "What should we think of someone who never admits error, never entertains doubt but adheres unflinchingly to the same ideas all his life, regardless of new evidence?" (p. 2). This book has become popular because Ravitch changed her views and abandoned policies that she once embraced. We like that because we know she is now *on our side*. But that misses the central value from this book. How do we examine our established opinions? How can we be wrong? Perhaps the only path away from the polarizing paralysis around education is to have genuine conversations among people who care about education.

*The Death and Life of the Great American School System* describes the challenges and failures of the market-based approach to education. It requires that we carefully evaluate our own beliefs and evidence. It also forces me to think, now what? Where do we go from here? How can we mobilize a careful campaign to reclaim public schools from the tyranny of narrow tests and wimpy standards? Ravitch has pointed us in the right direction but the heavy lifting is yet to come. Are we willing to take on that struggle, or will we simply wring our hands as education is usurped by the testing industry? No less than the future of the great American experiment in public education is at stake.

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