

The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choices are Undermining Education by Diane Ravitch

Summary Report by Bonnie Burn

Diane Ravitch, a research professor of Education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, served as Assistant Secretary of Education from 1991 to 1993 under President George H.W. Bush. Her long career in education includes an appointment by President William Clinton to the National Assessment Governing Board that oversees federal testing. Testing, accountability, choice, markets, and merit pay, as well as judging teachers and schools by performance, were major components of her focus. All of these are basic principles in the business world. Her many books and publications carry two consistent themes—a skepticism about pedagogical fads, enthusiasms, and movements; and belief in the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum, especially in history and literature. In this book, she undertakes an analysis of how these reforms actually play out in reality and how she came to change her mind about school choice and testing.

[public schools] are a primary mechanism through which a democratic society gives its citizens the opportunity to attain literacy and social mobility. Opportunity leaves much to the individual; it is not a guarantee of certain success. The schools cannot solve all of our social problems, nor are they perfect. But in a democratic society, they are necessary and valuable for individuals and for the commonweal. (Ravitch, p. 6)

Two government actions are important in the history of school reform:

1. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his legislation, “War on Poverty,” emphasizes equal access to education, establishes high standards and accountability and authorizes federally funded programs that are administered by the states. Scheduled to expire in 1970, it has been reauthorized every five years. Its latest reauthorization is No Child Left Behind.
2. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* is noted by Ravitch as a seminal document published in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. It has contributed to the sense that American schools are failing, and it started a wave of reform efforts at the local, state and federal levels.¹

Ravitch opens the discussion about school reform by showing how curriculum and standards were hijacked by the testing movement. In Fall 1994, Lynne Cheney, chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, opposed national standards of education for history. She felt the standards expressed a left-wing political bias, emphasized the nation’s failings and did not pay attention to the great men. Politicized standards were subsequently ignored by the politicians. President Clinton’s administration, however, issued policies that allowed the states to write their own standards, and to select tests that would make the states accountable for student achievement. After taking office, President George W. Bush, having had experience with testing in Texas, implemented the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program.² Students were to be tested in English and math and be proficient by 2014 or schools would be subject to

sanctions. Thus, test-based accountability—not standards—became the national education policy. “It is ironic that a conservative Republican president was responsible for the largest expansion of federal control in the history of American Education,” writes Ravitch (p. 21). The components of NCLB include accountability, high-stakes testing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools.

In 1989, when he took office, President George H.W. Bush commissioned a national summit of governors to develop a plan of action to improve education.³ The recommendations set out reasonable goals to be achieved by 2000 that included:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn
- American students will be first in the world in math and science
- At least 90 percent of students will graduate from high school
- All children will master challenging subject matter
- All adults will be literate and prepared to compete in the global economy
- Every school will be free of drugs, alcohol and violence

None of the goals were achieved by 2000.

In the 1990s, *system school reform* was the theme—all parts of the school system had to work in tandem to achieve student improvement. It was recognized that reform begins with determining what students should learn and be able to do. Other parts of the education system are then adjusted to meet those needs. New York City District 2 and Superintendent Anthony Alvarado were recognized as the “poster children” of this reform. Two programs emerged in District 2. One, titled **Balanced Literacy**, focused on reading strategies and teaching children to identify and practice them. No longer was “whole language” (e.g., phonics, spelling, grammar, punctuation, or linguistic analysis) taught. Blocks of time were set aside for shared and independent reading, word study, writing and reading aloud. Money was spent on teacher training, and teachers and principals who did not conform were replaced. A second program, **Constructivism**, was used for math. This method focuses on processes and social interaction among students. Students are supposed to think deeply, work collaboratively, and discover their own ways of solving problems. District 2 caught the eye of corporate reformers. They thought the achievement gap among racial and ethnic groups had been closed, and looked upon this as a formula to be used in other locations. The final report presented to the U.S. Department of Education in 2001 was very favorable and showed that much progress had been made; however, it noted that there was a lower proportion of impoverished students in this district and it was in the wealthiest quartile of urban districts in the nation. District 2 had experienced a rapid population growth, had become gentrified, and was serving a different socioeconomic group. Detractors noted that children were not learning to read and administrators were stifling teachers and parents by mandating “constructivist” materials and specific instructional strategies. In the end, there was no agreement among scholars about how successful this program was.

In San Diego in 1998, the business community hired Alan Bersin as city school superintendent. He was a former federal prosecutor. He learned of the New York City District 2 reforms and hired Anthony Alvarado as chancellor for instruction in San Diego. For the next seven years, 1998-2007, reforms were put in place. “Blueprint for Student Success in a Standards-Based System” was the name given to the district plan for education that incorporated the Balanced Literacy and constructionist approach to learning. Major changes were made in administration, and those not complying were fired. The teacher’s union was upset at the requirements and the pace of change. The central strategy was that “as the base of instruction across the whole system rises, so will the academic achievement of all students.” (p. 51) Was the reform a success? The fast pace of change and alienation of teachers and parents make it questionable.

With the election of Michael Bloomberg as mayor of New York City, a business model, “Children First,” was introduced in Fall 2003. Balanced Literacy and constructivist math were adopted and minimal attention was paid to science, history, literature, geography, civics, the arts, and other subjects. School districts were restructured into regional districts headed by a regional superintendent. Privately funded Learning Academies were established to mentor new principals. Charter schools and small high schools (500 students) were implemented. The program used a grading system for schools of A-F as was used in Florida. A corporate model of centralized, hierarchical, top-down control, supervision of classrooms—all standard corporate operating procedures—was implemented across the system. This reform had mixed reviews. State test scores went up as did spending (\$12.7 billion in 2002 to \$21.8 billion in 2009). Having accountability for the system given to a mayor who stands for re-election every four years does not increase accountability. Major issues rose (e.g., bus routes). Schools having mayoral control (e.g., Chicago and Cleveland) were identified as low performing. Ravitch concludes “that many factors affect educational performance other than the governance structure.” (p. 91)

Ravitch describes the reform and reality of implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and choice (vouchers and charter schools), issues that are in the forefront of current reform.

The NCLB was an iteration of the basic federal aid legislation known originally as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. There were four basic principles:

1. Every child should be tested every year in grades three through eight, using state tests, not a national test;
2. Decisions about how to reform schools would be made by the states, not by Washington;
3. Low-performing schools would get help to improve; and
4. Students stuck in persistently dangerous or failing schools would be able to transfer to other schools.

NCLB has been problematic since it was established. Because each state is responsible for proficiency, there is no uniformity and states can claim gains when there are none. Ravitch concludes that achieving proficiency by 2014 seems to be unattainable; therefore, “it makes little sense to impose remedies that have never been effective and to assume that they will produce better than reasonably good results.” (p. 103) There are consequences. “...if students are not on track to be proficient by 2014, then schools will be closed, teachers will be fired, principals will lose their jobs and some—perhaps many—public schools will be privatized. All because they were not able to achieve the impossible.” (p. 103) A more dangerous effect is “that it is a timetable for the demolition of public education in the United States. The goal of 100 percent proficiency places thousands of public schools at risk of being privatized, turned into charters, or being closed. (p. 104) Some results that we are already seeing are a narrowing curriculum as teachers are teaching to the test, children learning to blacken in the test bubble but not being able to write a thoughtful response to a question, and a singular focus on test scores distorts and degrades the meaning and practice of education.

A history of vouchers and choice is traced from *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) through 1990 when Charter Schools were authorized by state legislators. Vouchers could be used anywhere and would solve the problem of giving federal aid to religious schools.

The advocates of choice—whether vouchers or charters—predicted that choice would transform American Education. They were certain that choice would produce higher achievement. They based their case for choice on the failings of the public schools, pointing to low test scores, low graduation rates, and the achievement gap between children of different racial groups. They involved

the clarion call of *A Nation at Risk* as proof that America's schools were caught in a downward spiral; only choice, they argued could reverse the "rising tide of mediocrity," ... They were confident that when schools compete all students gain. (Ravitch, pp. 126-127)

These two models, vouchers and charters, represent a market model and are based on the belief in the power of competition and in the value of deregulation. In the years since these reforms have become a reality, there is no evidence of dramatic improvement for the neediest students or in the public schools they left behind. (p. 132)

Ravitch includes two thought-provoking chapters on accountability and teacher performance. Presidents and other government officials want measurable results as proof that federal tax dollars are well spent. The debate is that test results indicate not only proficiency of the students but also the quality of education the student received. How schools approach testing and the variability among tests and in students taking the tests are discussed in detail. The **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP)** is presented as a more reliable test. It is a federal test that measures the progress over time of students in the nation, state, and a number of urban districts. Another is the International Assessment used to compare students to their peers in other countries. Beyond tests, she believes, accountability must include visual inspection of schools on a regular basis by trained observers, more frequently than annually if the schools are low performers. This would improve the decisions being made about closing schools and making recommendations about improving the quality of education. The system of grading schools A-F that was implemented in Florida is portrayed as doing harm because it stigmatizes a complex institution. Ravitch concludes:

Accountability as we know it now is not helping our schools. Its measures are too narrow and imprecise, and its consequences too severe. NCLB assumes that accountability based solely on test scores will reform American education. This is a mistake. A good accountability system must include professional judgment, not simply a test score, and other measures of students' achievement such as grades, teacher's evaluations, student work, attendance, and graduation rates. (p. 163)

Through the example of "What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do" (a favorite teacher), Ravitch presents the issues that teachers face in an environment that threatens their jobs based on student test results. Detailed information about tenure, unions, developing, hiring, and continuing professional development of teachers, and impact on students by effective teachers is presented.

Before concluding, Ravitch presents reforms initiated by the "Billionaire Boys' Club." The first project mentioned was a collaboration between the **Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation in 1967**. Its premise was that schools in impoverished urban neighborhoods would improve if they were governed by parents and members of the local community. This project was located in black and Hispanic neighborhoods in New York City and was a successful effort to decentralize schools. The project ended in 1969 when schools were decentralized and elected school boards were established. This action eliminated the three school districts in the project. The decentralized period lasted from 1969 to 2002 when New York state legislators gave control back to the mayor.

The second, in 1993, involved Walter H. Annenberg, a publishing magnate, who donated \$500 million to improve public education. The **Annenberg Challenge grants** were matched by other private donors at each site that received a grant—eighteen cities, including Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia, and some rural areas.

Millions of dollars were set aside for arts education. This philanthropy enabled the establishment of a network of small schools, promoted schools within schools, small learning communities, leadership, professional development of teachers, parent engagement, social services for students and other things. The Annenberg contribution encouraged other foundations to donate to public education (e.g., the Lilly Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation). This expanded focus of private donations to public education made it difficult to assess the effect on school reform. In 2001 when the Annenberg program ended, the conclusion was that public education had not been transformed.

In 2002, **venture philanthropy**, defined as targeted investments in education reform, appeared in the form of contributions from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. Their donations were considered investments that were expected to produce measureable results (or a return on investment). Educators were being introduced to terms like choice, deregulation, incentives and other market-based approaches. These foundations set policy agendas for school districts, states, and even the U.S. Department of Education. Accountability became a major issue in accepting this influx of money. These foundations are not public agencies and are not subject to public oversight or review. If voters don't agree with their policies, voters cannot vote them out. The foundations are accountable to no one. The reform efforts of these foundations are discussed in detail. The focus for them seems to be in increasing the number of charter schools and teacher effectiveness. Adoption of corporate methods for school leadership and changes in the way teachers are compensated were also issues of interest.

Philanthrocapitalism has not created vast improvement in student achievement. It appears that the foundations have unaccountable power, and no sanctions are levied against them if the reform fails. There is concern that this kind of reform is a move to privatize public education. Or is it creating a two tiered system where some students may attend privately managed schools while others are assigned to the traditional public schools?

Ravitch concludes with a "Lessons Learned" chapter. Reiterating the need for an educated citizenry to carry on the democratic government under which we live, she recaps principles of education discussed throughout the book:

- Policy making for schools must be made at the local district level and not by a legislative body.
- Essential ingredients of a successful school system are curriculum, experienced teachers, effective instruction, willing students, adequate resources, and community values.
- Neighborhood schools anchor communities and build bonds among neighbors.
- Market places do not have magical power. The goal must be to establish school systems that foster academic excellence in every school and in every neighborhood.
- Charter schools cannot take motivated students in the poorest communities from the public schools, a choice that will debilitate public education.
- Poverty and its impact on learning cannot be ignored.

So, what can we do? Ravitch supports a national curriculum established by private organizations such as the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers working with state education departments and private groups such as Achieve. (p. 235). Core curriculum could be taught for part of the day with the remainder of the day spent on fulfilling state requirements. Test scores cannot be the sole measure of student or school quality. Effective teachers are the lynch pin of education. They must be evaluated for qualifications before hiring and for performance afterwards and be paid a professional wage. Children should be prepared and ready for school by being exposed to a number of things by

their families who are responsible for developing self-discipline, good manners, and cooperative skills in a group environment. Parents must ensure that children attend school regularly, are in good health, and do their homework. Parents must be involved. Finally, the diversity among us is assimilated in a universal, free public education system that respects the private and religious schools within the system.

¹A Nation at Risk, National Commission on Education in Excellence, Executive Summary, April 1983, <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>

²No Child Left Behind is the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

³Other presidential commissions on education include:

- The Truman Report (1947)
- “Committee on Education Beyond the High School” – President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1956)
- Task Force on Education – President John F. Kennedy (1960)
- Commission on the Future of Higher Education – President George W. Bush, (2006)