

League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces

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

Summary Report by Sue Cain

Ravitch was for many years one of the strongest advocates for the testing and accountability agenda. Because she is known for her impeccable credentials as a scholar and historian of education, she was a commanding presence among critics of our schools. However, in recent years she grew to reconsider her former beliefs and wrote the book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, joining the highly vocal opposition to the critics. In Ravitch's latest book, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, she discusses her growing concerns that reflect major changes in her earlier assessment of our public schools and warns of the growing dangers from many vested interest groups who are systematically attacking America's public schools.

In *Reign of Error*, Ravitch persuasively challenges the assumptions by critics that our public school systems are failures. She provides a deeper argument against the privatization of public education being recommended by critics, some of whom speak out for idealistic reasons and others for the profit of private enterprise. She argues that federal programs such as Bush's "No Child Left Behind" and Obama's "Race to the Top" set unreasonable targets for students, punish schools and result in teachers being fired based on their students' standardized test performances. She warns that corporate reformers, individual billionaires, Wall Street hedge fund managers and private interest organizations such as ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) are encouraging the privatization of public education and causing increasing problems in providing strong public schools that serve all students with an opportunity for a quality education.

Ravitch writes, "One of the most disheartening aspects of the current reform movement is its disdain for the education profession. In many states, governors and mayors have sought out non-educators, or people with meager experience in education, for positions of leadership." She goes on to write, "Some of the worst education policies today, especially those that rely exclusively on standardized testing, have been imposed by non-educators who were wrongly hired as state or city commissioners of education." Education professionals with real education experience need to have more voice in changes to education policies.

Challenging many of the faulty claims being made in criticism of American schools, she cites research that challenges the assumptions that our schools are failing.

Ravitch writes, "Public Education is not 'broken.' It is not failing or declining. The diagnosis is wrong, and the solutions of the corporate reformers are wrong. Our urban schools are in trouble because of concentrated poverty and racial segregation ... Public education is in crisis only so far as society is and only so far as this new narrative of crisis has destabilized it. The solutions proposed by the self-proclaimed reformers have not worked as promised. They have failed even by their own most highly valued measure which is test scores. At the same time, the reformers' solutions have had a destructive impact on education as a whole."

Ravitch strongly criticizes those vested interest groups who claim that we need to turn to alternatives such as privatization of schools, charter schools for profit, school vouchers, merit pay for teachers, closing public schools that are "failing," and firing teachers based on students' standardized test results. In Chapters 5 through 21, Ravitch takes each one of the claims by these critics of our public schools and refutes them with detailed explanations, statistics and facts.

Chapter 5: The Facts About Test Scores

CLAIM - Test scores are falling, and the education system is broken and obsolete.

REALITY - Test scores are at their highest point ever recorded.

Chapter 6: The Facts About the Achievement Gap

CLAIM - Achievement gaps are large and getting worse.

REALITY - We have made genuine progress in narrowing the achievement gaps, but they will remain large if we do nothing about the causes of the gaps.

Chapter 7: The Facts About the International Test Scores

CLAIM - We are falling behind other nations, putting our economy and our national security at risk.

REALITY - An old lament, not true then, not true now.

Chapter 8: The Facts About High School Graduation Rates

CLAIM - The nation has a dropout crisis, and high school graduation rates are falling.

REALITY - High school dropouts are at an all-time low, and high school graduation rates are at an all-time high.

Chapter 9: The Facts About College Graduation Rates

CLAIM - Our economy will suffer unless we have the highest graduation rate in the world.

REALITY - There is no evidence for this claim.

Chapter 10: How Poverty Affects Academic Achievement

CLAIM - Poverty is an excuse for ineffective teaching and failing schools.

REALITY - Poverty is highly correlated with low academic achievement.

Chapter 11: The Facts About Teachers and Test Scores

CLAIM - Teachers determine student test scores, and test scores may be used to identify and reward effective teachers and to fire those who are not effective.

REALITY - Test scores are not the best way to identify the best teachers.

Chapter 12: Why Merit Pay Fails

CLAIM - Merit pay will improve achievement.

REALITY - Merit pay has never improved achievement. 3

Chapter 13: Do Teachers Need Tenure and Seniority?

CLAIM - Schools will improve if tenure and seniority are abolished.

REALITY - There is no evidence for this claim.

Chapter 14: The Problem with Teach for America

CLAIM - Teach for America recruits teachers and leaders whose high expectations will one day ensure that every child has an excellent education.

REALITY - Teach for America sends bright young people into tough classrooms where they get about the same results as bright young people in similar classrooms, but those from Teach for America leave the profession sooner.

Chapter 15: The Mystery of Michelle Rhee

At this point, it is impossible to discern a lasting legacy from the Rhee era in the D.C. schools that continued under the control of Kaya Henderson. The schools have experienced high levels of instability because of the frequent turnover of teachers and principals. More public schools will close, and more charter schools will open. Nearly half the students in the district are enrolled in charter schools, more than in any other city except New Orleans. The district's public schools have not been transformed academically. The students in D.C. are still poor and are still low performing on federal tests. The reform program for privatization, teacher bonuses, and teacher firings was not successful. Rhee did not prove that poverty doesn't matter. She made promises she could not keep. The problems she inherited remain unchanged.

Chapter 16: The Contradictions of Charters

CLAIM - Charter schools will revolutionize American education by their freedom to innovate and produce dramatically better results.

REALITY - Charter schools run the gamut from excellent to awful and are, on average, no more innovative or successful than public schools.

Chapter 17: Trouble in E-Land

CLAIM - Virtual schools will bring the promise of personalized, customized learning to every student and usher in an age of education excellence for all.

REALITY - Virtual schools are cash cows for their owners but poor substitutes for real teachers and real schools.

Chapter 18: Parent Trigger, Parent Tricker

CLAIM - *If parents seize control of their schools, they can make them better.*

REALITY - *There is no evidence for this claim.*

Chapter 19: The Failure of Vouchers

CLAIM - *Students who receive **vouchers for private and religious schools will experience dramatic success.***

REALITY - *There is no evidence for this claim. 4*

Chapter 20: Schools Don't Improve if They Are Closed

CLAIM - *Schools can be dramatically improved by firing principals, firing half of all of the teachers, or closing the schools and starting fresh.*

REALITY - *There is no evidence for this claim.*

In Chapters 22 through 32 of her book, Ravitch offers specific solutions with detailed plans and recommendations to preserve and improve U. S. public education.

SOLUTION 1: *Provide good prenatal care for every pregnant woman.*

SOLUTION 2: *Make high-quality early childhood education available to all children.*

SOLUTION 3: *Every school should have a full, balanced and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education.*

SOLUTION 4: *Reduce class sizes to improve achievement and behavior.*

SOLUTION 5: *Ban for-profit charters and charter chains, and ensure that charter schools collaborate with public schools to support better education for all children.*

SOLUTION 6: *Provide the medical and social services that poor children need to keep up with their advantaged peers.*

SOLUTION 7: *Eliminate high-stakes standardized testing, and rely instead on assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do.*

SOLUTION 8: *Insist that teachers, principals, and superintendents be professional educators.*

SOLUTION 9: *Public schools should be controlled by elected school boards or by boards in large cities appointed for a set term by more than one elected official.*

SOLUTION 10: *Devise actionable strategies and specific goals to reduce racial segregation and poverty.*

SOLUTION 11: *Recognize that public education is a public responsibility not a consumer good.*

Ravitch does believe that our public schools have room for improvement and that states should raise their standards for certifying teachers. She states that “Members of the public should insist that those who teach and lead schools enrolling their children be well qualified, well prepared, and experienced.” She understands as a historian and professor that continuous improvement is essential for any quality public education system. She doesn't think that brow beating educators is the best way to get there. With regard to state-teacher certification, Ravitch writes, “States should raise standards for certifying teachers. They should not accept credentials earned online. Future teachers need practical, hands-on experience in real classrooms with real children, not point-and-click virtual experience.”

In the final chapter, “Conclusion: The Pattern on the Rug,” Ravitch provides a brief analysis and review of what has happened since the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation was enacted under the Bush administration. She notes that some of the most negative elements of NCLB have been continued in the Obama administration's federal program for financial assistance to public schools in their version of the legislative mandates known as “Race to the Top”. The chapter also includes a brief discussion of the Common Core Standards currently being adopted and implemented in a majority of the states even though they have never been field-tested.

With reference to the partisans of choice and privatization, she points out that “they may have political power and money, but their cause lacks one crucial ingredient: it does not have a popular base.” She makes a strong case for the critical connection between public education and saving our democracy.

Ravitch concludes with the following message: “Despite its faults, the American system of democratically controlled schools has been the mainstay of our communities and the foundation for our nation's success. We must work together to improve our public schools. We must extend the promise of equal educational opportunity to all the children of our nation. Protecting our public schools against privatization and saving them for future generations of American children is the civil rights issue of our time.”