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Unmasking the Reformers:  
An Essay Review of *Ravitch's Reign of Error*

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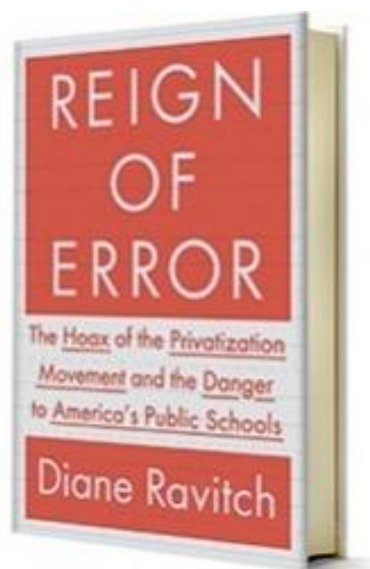
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*Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* invigorates the ongoing debate surrounding the reform of K-12 public education. Author Diane

Ravitch does so by interfusing quantitative and qualitative evidence related to a number of significantly contested issues including standardized testing, high school graduation rates, school and teacher accountability, and

the privatization of public schools. Those who criticize charter schools, vouchers systems, merit pay for teachers, and the increased testing of elementary and secondary school children will find their perspectives affirmed and validated throughout the book. In contrast, those who support the national, state, and local educational policy shifts of the past several years and advocate for the continuation of this trajectory will find their adversaries' arguments clearly articulated.



Readers should not be intimidated by the compendious nature of the book or the author's esteemed reputation within the field of education. Ravitch skillfully and persuasively leads her audience through myriad statistics, intricate complexities of educational history and policy, and the nuances of politics and power. Throughout the book, she candidly and consistently reiterates her most salient points, making it impossible for a reader to misunderstand her impassioned beliefs.

However, is it necessary for one book to occupy 396 pages of textual real estate and employ an arsenal of 41 graphs to craft a convincing argument that the American public school system is in jeopardy not because of ineffective teaching or leadership, but rather because of ominous external forces? Given (a) the power and influence of those leading the educational reform movement and making the rebuttal to this argument, (b) the profound importance of the debate regarding public education, (c) the author is Diane Ravitch — the answer to this question is a prodigious YES!



### The Power and Influence Leading the Reform Movement

Ravitch's extensive arguments are warranted given the power and influence of the reform movement and the wealth of financial and political resources behind it. In the first fifteen chapters of the book, Ravitch

withholds few words in her analysis of those influencing and leading the current external factors threatening America's public schools. She describes numerous and well-recognized government leaders from both major political parties, business

kingpins, venture capitalists, media moguls, and several of this generation's philanthropic icons as purveyors of a fear-driven rhetoric motivated by political and economic ambitions. In her words, they are "speculators, entrepreneurs, ideologues, snake-oil salesmen, profit-making businesses, and Wall Street hedge fund managers" (p. 31).

Her extensive list of individuals includes political heavy-hitters such as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Jeb Bush, Bobby Jindal, Scott Walker, Chris Christie, Andrew Cuomo, Michael Bloomberg, and Arne Duncan among many others. Prominent and deep-coffered foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation receive repeated mention by Ravitch as do media personalities Rupert Murdoch and David Guggenheim. Ravitch reserves her most pugilistic comments for educational leaders Wendy Kopp (Teach for America CEO) and Michelle Rhee (former chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools). Rhee, described as the "quintessential corporate reformer" (p. 146) is centered in Ravitch's crosshairs for an entire chapter (pp. 145-155).

Ravitch's assertion is clear. Flush with cash and clout, the objectives of this formidable

line-up are to first privatize America's K-12 public schools and then to capitalize on the profit opportunities this will create. To reach these objectives, they have purposefully reframed "privatization" as "choice" and "vouchers" as "opportunity scholarships." They have semantically cloaked their true intent and orchestrated a well-honed social message by using terms such as "innovation" and "accountability" and business-influenced phrases such as "free-market competition." Ravitch presents this as an insidious hoax, when she writes,

If the American public understood that reformers want to privatize their public schools and divert their taxes to pay profits to investors, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If parents understood that the reformers want to close down their community schools and require them to go shopping for schools, some far from home, that may or may not accept their children, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If the American public understood that the very concept of education was being disfigured into a mechanism to apply standardized testing and sort their children into data points on a normal curve, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If the American public understood that their children's teachers will be judged by the same test scores that label their children as worthy or unworthy, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. If the American public knew how inaccurate and unreliable these

methods are, both for children and for teachers, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform. And that is why the reform message must be rebranded to make it palatable to the public (p. 35).

Chapter by chapter, Ravitch methodically refutes the claims of the reform movement. In doing so, she resituates this crusade from one spurred by low standardized test scores, poor high school graduation rates, frustrated parents, and dismal international rankings threatening national security, to a movement driven by greed and power. In her opinion, the progress of public education has been “slow and steady” and “moving in the right direction” (p. 78). To support her contention, she reports select categories of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which appear to dispute the claim that performance on standardized tests have been declining. She also discounts the four-year graduation rate used by the U.S. Department of Education and substitutes alternate parameters to demonstrate graduation rates are actually increasing.

Ravitch acknowledges the achievement gap, (variances related to performances on standardized test scores as well as other educational outcomes; often most pronounced and persistent for students of color, living in poverty, and with limited English skills) as a serious issue facing the country. The reform movement repeatedly references these differences as shocking indicators of the failure of America's public schools and attributes the achievement gap

to ineffective teaching. Ravitch again reframes a central tenet of the reform movement. Rather than "fixing the schools" (p. 93) and focusing on the achievement gap, she argues that closing the social and economic disparities between society's advantaged and disadvantaged children should be at the epicenter of educational reform.

While socio-economic factors are not absolute predictors of children's academic performance, Ravitch tells readers, "We know what works. What works are the very opportunities that advantaged families provide for their children. In homes with adequate resources, children get advantages that enable them to arrive in school healthy and ready to learn" (p. 6). In contrast, children who are from disadvantaged homes are more likely to experience stress and disruptions to their lives; be homeless; live in dangerous neighborhoods with inadequate housing; have asthma; be exposed to lead; have untreated vision, hearing and dental issues; and have an incarcerated or uneducated parent. They are "dragged down by the circumstances into which they were born, through no fault of their own" (p. 94).

Widely referred to as opportunity gaps, these disparities are caused by the realities of poverty and disempowerment (Carter & Welner, 2013; Gorski, 2013); and from Ravitch's view point, are currently as entrenched as they are ignored in the United States. According to Ravitch, "Our society has grown to accept poverty as an inevitable fact of life, and there seems to be little or no political will to do anything about it" (p. 93).

Ravitch believes opportunity gaps and the improvement of schools and teaching practices are both important issues which must be addressed. However, for her the critical choice becomes which of the two will take priority.

Rather than address poverty and other difficult social issues, Ravitch maintains that the power elite have chosen to minimize the impact of opportunity gaps. Instead of trying to enact policies to equalize the opportunities of children and families, they divert the public's attention to closing the achievement gap by means such as incentivizing teachers to improve their performance, punishing teachers who have the lowest-performing students, creating unconventional routes to teacher licensure, and closing low-performing school. Ravitch, again painstakingly counters each of these reform approaches with facts, figures, and anecdotes.

### The Profound Importance of the Debate

Ravitch's expansive investigation is also necessary given the critical importance of the debate regarding public education, a debate that extends well beyond any single classroom or school. W.E.B. DuBois (1902) warned of threats to public education when he stated, "The ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education, must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with souls and not with dollars" (p. 81). Like DuBois, Ravitch expresses the crucial role of America's public education

system and the dangers of opening it to profit-making endeavors with the following statement.

Also forgotten is that public schools were created by communities and states for civic purposes. In the nineteenth century, they were often called "common schools." They were a project of the public commons, the community. They were created to build and sustain democracy, to teach young people how to live and work together with others, and to teach the skills and knowledge needed to participate fully in society. Inherent in the idea of public education was a clear understanding that educating the younger generation was a public responsibility, shared by all, whether or not they had children in the public schools, whether or not they even had children. (p. 207)

The profound importance of public education resonates in chapters 16-21 in which Ravitch characterizes charter schools, vouchers, school closings, and privatization as direct assaults on the American public school system. She scoffs at the reform movement's claim that their agenda represents the next great civil rights issue of our time. According to Ravitch, charter schools are touted for using innovation to teach the neediest students with financial efficiency, yet they have found it difficult to meet these expectations. In reality, charter schools can turn away the most vulnerable students including those with disabilities and those who have limited English skills. Their per-student costs are often higher than those

for comparable public schools. More importantly, the costs of charters are covered by extracting funds from traditional public schools. In her grim appraisal of the effect of charter schools, Ravitch concludes that public schools "have already suffered damage that may be irreparable" (p. 179).

Ravitch addresses other reform topics such as vouchers and parent-triggered seizures of public schools. Presented as hopeful indicators that America is not ready to abandon its public schools, Ravitch notes that although parent-trigger laws have passed in several states, the concept has not received wide-spread grassroots support. Similarly, vouchers, which she believes are a means to re-segregate schools and "represent a major step toward privatization" (p. 213), have been introduced in several locations. However, in her analysis of vouchers, Ravitch found scant evidence that they result in dramatic improvements in educational outcomes or that the American public broadly embraces the idea.

Finally, Ravitch challenges the reform practices of merit-pay, de-selecting (firing) teachers and principals, and closing public schools. Reformers present a seemingly simple process to turn around what they deem to be failing schools. Reward educators whose students score well on standardized tests. Remove teachers and administrators and close schools whose students perform poorly. To rebut this idea, Ravitch recounts the highly-publicized, one billion dollar "turnaround" program of the Chicago Public Schools, a school system she

depicts as the "playground of corporate reform" (p. 318).

According to Ravitch's interpretation of the evidence, the successes specific to the Chicago turnaround effort and lauded by the reform movement are far from definitive. In the general context, she finds the evidence connecting improved test scores to turnaround practices as questionable. What is indisputable to Ravitch is the damaging impact these practices have on students, teachers, public schools, local communities, and society. As she states earlier in the book, "levels of inequality will deepen if teachers are incentivized to shun students with the highest needs. Schools in high-poverty districts already have difficulty retaining staff and replacing them. Who will want to teach in schools that are at risk of closing because of the students they enroll" (p. 109).

In the final portion of her book, Ravitch poses solutions to protect and improve public education and its fundamental contributions to democracy. These include confronting systemic social issues external to schools. Unless addressed, a number of isolated issues, but most certainly the interaction between them, will continue to impact the educational outcomes of America's public education system. Ravitch calls for reducing the "toxic mix" (pp. 291-299) of poverty and racial segregation as well as improving access to pre-natal and medical care, out-of-school enrichment opportunities, and parental support services.

In addition to social issues, Ravitch provides suggestions to improve factors internal to



schools. This includes enriching and enhancing the K-12 curriculum, reducing class size, and strengthening the preparation of educators. Rather than increasing the number of tests given to students, she advocates for improving the understanding and application of educational measures. "Tests are not scientific instruments" and are "not designed to measure school or teacher quality" (p. 264). However, Ravitch believes they can be useful when implemented in program evaluation, for diagnostic purposes, or to establish trends.

Ravitch concedes that charter schools are now a permanent fixture in the K-12 educational arena. She asserts that if current policies and practices related to charter schools are left unchecked, the future of educational equity in America is tenuous.

Charter schools would recruit and enroll students who are motivated and willing, while public schools would serve the rejects, the students who didn't make it into a charter school, those who were unwanted by charters because they didn't speak English, had disabilities, or threatened in some other way to lower the charter's test scores. A dual system is inherently discriminatory, especially when one sector is privately run, deregulated, unsupervised, and free to write its own rules and avoid or eject students it does not want, and the other must take all students and abide by all state laws and regulations, no matter how burdensome and costly. (p. 249)

However, Ravitch believes the development of dual school systems underwritten by public funding, based on consumerism, and devoid of community ties is not inevitable. Her solution to prevent American education from evolving into two separate and very unequal school systems is to regulate charter schools in the following ways:

- prohibiting privatization;
- limiting authorization only to non-profit local entities;
- monitoring financial practices to promote transparency and reflect per-student funding similar to that in the local public schools;
- requiring enrollment criteria to be inclusive of all children but especially those who have been unsuccessful in public schools; present behavioral, physical, and intellectual challenges; and do not speak English.

## Diane Ravitch

Finally, the breadth and depth of the book are inescapable because Ravitch herself is personally and deeply embedded in the reform movement she now criticizes. Her curriculum vitae (Ravitch, 2014) is impressive, but several items included in it will surprise readers unacquainted with her professional history. Most notably, she was a former assistant secretary in the U. S. Department of Education during the administration of George W. Bush and was part of the bipartisan effort to create and pass the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001. This act introduced the concept of

“failing schools” and set initial testing and accountability standards that by Ravitch’s own admission were unrealistic.

She also served a seven-year term on the National Assessment Board charged with oversight of the NAEP, a common standardized test administered in K-12 education. Ravitch touts the NAEP, when used appropriately, as “an exemplar” (p. 263) and as the “one authoritative measure of academic performance over time” (p. 44). However, she acknowledges that reform advocates frequently cite NAEP results to “present a bleak portrait of what students know and can do” (p. 46). In addition, to her service in the public sector, she supported educational reform efforts through her past association with groups such as the Manhattan Institute, Brookings Institution, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and Hoover Institution (Ravitch, 2014).

Much has been said and written about Ravitch’s defection from her past affiliations, particularly after the release of her previous book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (2010). In that book, Ravitch refuted her former work as an outspoken proponent of the educational reform movement and outlined a quite radical deviation from her prior point of view.

Given Ravitch’s background, *Reign of Error* readers should not be surprised by the lengthy, somewhat repetitious, and zealous nature of her arguments. If *The Death and Life of the Great American Schools System* was Ravitch’s mea culpa, *Reign of Error* is

her cathartic attempt to derail a train she set into motion and engineered along its early journey. Whether or not the change in her philosophical position adds to or distracts from the credibility of Ravitch’s arguments is an important consideration for the reader. More importantly, whether or not her arguments are able to alter the course of K-12 educational reform is a critical consideration for all of America.

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