

The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education

by Diane Ravitch, Basic Books , 2010

*Reviewed by Katharine Beals**

The Death and Life of the Great American School System was wildly hailed as author and education critic Diane Ravitch's dramatic about-face on No Child Left Behind, charter schools, and school choice. What's missing from this sensational take is that Ravitch has changed her mind only about school reform tactics, and not about what constitutes good schools, or about her top priorities in fostering them.

She still stresses curriculum—apparently still her topmost priority. She still supports a challenging, content-rich core curriculum of the sort promoted by E.D. Hirsch and his Core Knowledge Foundation. She still believes that the best teachers are those with who know their fields well and are enthusiastic about teaching. She still believes that attracting such teachers is nearly as essential, if not as essential, as curriculum reform.

It's in the question of why we've strayed so far from these ideals that Ravitch has shifted. While her earlier research (c.f. *Left Back*, published in 2000) critiqued, *inter alia*, a variety of prominent fad-peddling members of the education establishment, Ravitch now appears to blame just three factors: the high-stakes testing and accountability of No Child Left Behind (NCLB); the meddling in education by powerful outsiders like politicians and businessmen; and school choice ventures that skim off the best students and leave the rest to the most struggling of public schools.

On NCLB testing and accountability, Ravitch is convincing. Tests can be effective, comprehensive measures of achievement, in which case teaching "to" them is equivalent to teaching students what they should learn anyway. But, as Ravitch explains, NCLB's top-down, high-stakes, punitive approach deters states from devising tests that come anywhere near this ideal.

Equally convincing are Ravitch's assessments of specific cases of meddling by politicians and businessmen. The San Diego and New York City experiments she describes were clearly wrong-headed. So are those of well-meaning philanthropists like Bill Gates, as seen, for example, in the Philadelphia fiasco known as the School of the Future.

But are outsiders—politicians and business people—the only ones responsible for failed experiments? What about all those powerful insiders who, too, have dabbled in top-down reform? What about the infamous Palo Alto charter school run by the Stanford School of Education, which recently lost its charter after making California's list of lowest performing schools? What about the many superintendents who continue to mandate disastrous curricula

like Investigations and Everyday Math, often with so little empirical justification that, in the case of Seattle, parents successfully sued the district in court? Many education school professors are as out of touch with k12 classrooms as politicians and business leaders are, and they bear even more responsibility for constructivist education experiments than Bloomberg and Gates do—not least because their views often influence the decisions that the politicians and philanthropists make about curriculum and pedagogy.

Ravitch does not discuss the role of education school professors in today's failed experiments. She doesn't mention how many of these professors sit on the editorial boards of constructivist math textbooks, or serve as constructivist math curriculum advisors and professional developers, or promulgate constructivist reading and writing packages like Balanced Literacy and Writer's Workshop. Nor does she note how, in the course of their day jobs, they routinely indoctrinate hordes of highly impressionable students in failed theories about how children learn and about what fosters higher level thinking, thus dissuading many prospective teachers from direct, content-rich instruction and the standard algorithms of arithmetic. More generally, she fails to acknowledge how much power our education schools have over the opinions of teachers, principals, superintendents, and curriculum developers, and how effectively they snuff out the criticisms by mathematicians and scientists of k12 math and science curricula, the recent discoveries by cognitive scientists on the importance of content-rich instruction, and program evaluations (e.g., Project Follow Through) that favor direct instruction over child-centered pedagogies.

Ravitch devotes four chapters to the failed experiments of politicians and business people and another to NCLB. Not one chapter focuses on the power brokers inside the education establishment. Somehow, in the years since *Left Back*, Ravitch seems to have convinced herself that the nation's education schools, superintendents, and school boards have a reasonable track record in comparison with politicians and businessmen.

Of course, if school boards and education schools are also part of the problem, the question arises as to where the solution can possibly lie. If it's only the insiders who potentially know what works in education, and if their wisdom is compromised by failed education theory, the only remedy is to re-empower those who simultaneously are the least indoctrinated and the most interested in the education of children: namely, their parents. Why not give parents more of a say in their local schools, for example in the hiring of principals and teachers? Why not allow them an active role in decisions about curriculum and pedagogy, taking seriously what they report about what works and what doesn't work for their children?

Unfortunately, we're moving in the opposite direction. Schools in our largest districts, disproportionately home to our most vulnerable students, are increasingly controlled by unelected superintendents and school boards. Rarely are mayors voted out of office for making unpopular decisions or appointments with respect to education in particular. School boards

around the country seem ever more interested in the advice of education school-trained specialists than in the concerns of parents. Even where boards are elected rather than appointed, how often do ballots include electable candidates who favor relinquishing much of their future power to the people and deferring to parents rather than to so-called education experts?

Ironically, Ravitch accuses those who seek to crack these power structures of attempting to destroy public education, when in fact most of our public schools haven't been truly public in quite some time. Though publicly funded and free and open to all local children, they are decreasingly accountable to the concerns of their constituents.

The most immediate way around this is to let parents vote with their feet; to give them what Ravitch, who doesn't include parents as part of the solution, no longer supports: school choice. But true choice requires schools that are accessible to everyone (i.e., local and publicly funded or vouchered) and that present meaningful alternatives in curriculum and pedagogy (i.e., reflecting parental demand and what's known about effective instruction).

Ravitch rightly describes charter schools as falling short on both measures, and as not, on average, providing a better alternative to public schools. What she doesn't admit, however, is that these shortcomings aren't inherent to charter schools per se, but largely result from the obstacles placed in their way by state governments and the education establishment. Since most states require that most charter school teachers be certified, it's hard for charters to avoid hiring teachers who haven't been indoctrinated by education schools. The lengthy and highly technical application that would-be charter school founders must submit can often be properly filled out only with substantial help from establishment insiders. Applicants must demonstrate in detail how the charter's curriculum will line up with those infamous, NCLB-inspired state standards. Many school districts limit the number of new charters they will license, and their highly political application process tends to favor insiders. School districts also limit enrollment and/or prevent expansion. Both of these factors force some charters to accept only a fraction of their applicants. Beyond all this, charters face many of the same regulatory burdens as existing schools, as well as, simultaneously, all of the challenges and startup costs that come with starting a new school without the logistical and initial financial support of the local school district.

Perhaps it's therefore more immediately feasible to situate educational alternatives within existing public schools—something that Ravitch, in fact, supports. Again the alternatives must be true alternatives, both in curriculum and in pedagogy (reflecting parental demand and what's known about effective instruction). Their existence should thus result in at least two K6 (or K8, or K12) curricular pathways within a given school: in addition to the constructivist (or contemporary American) default, a traditional (or continental European / Asian) alternative. Key as well are the parents, who should be the ones deciding which pathway their kids will

follow. Do they choose the Everyday Math / Investigations sequence, or the Singapore Math / Saxon Math sequence? Do they choose Balanced Literacy, or phonics and content-focused reading instruction? Do they choose Writer's Workshop, or sentence-focused writing instruction? Do they choose a curriculum organized around projects and "problem solving," or a traditional, sequential core knowledge curriculum? Do they choose more cooperative group activities or more independent learning opportunities?

Some of those who prefer the alternative curricula and pedagogies may nonetheless protest that these won't reach enough of the children who most desperately need them. Indeed, Ravitch makes just this argument against choice: it favors those with the more resourceful, educated parents. Perhaps only the latter will realize that a particular educational model is the better one. But all sorts of parents recognize the virtues of phonics, direct instruction, and arithmetic drills; the problem for the less advantaged parents isn't that they're clueless about what's best for their kids, but that all too often none of the schools they are able to choose from actually offer them what they want.

The fact that some parents will make bad choices (at least initially, before the comparative results of the different models start surfacing) is no reason to withhold choice from those who wouldn't otherwise have it. All too rarely do opponents of choice—who typically have the money, the connections, or the cunning to ensure satisfactory choices for their own children—truly consider what it means to have no choice at all; what it means when your child is sentenced to years of terrible classrooms in terrible schools, in dire need of an alternative right now.

Parental choice does not figure in Ravitch's solutions. Instead, she seems to think that abandoning NCLB and charters will bring automatic improvement. She seems to believe that the worst of constructivism is on its way out and that it's possible to attract and train good teachers without drastically reforming our schools of education.

In reality, today's education schools are neither attracting nor training the type of enthusiastic, knowledgeable teacher that Ravitch holds up as a paragon. Ravitch suspects, with good reason, that her favorite teacher, the intelligent, exacting, and highly literary Mrs. Ratliff, would languish under NCLB. But would Mrs. Ratliff even have become a teacher in today's world? Would someone who is "stifled by the jargon, the indifference to classical literature, and the hostility to her manner of teaching" last through even one week of ed school pabulum, projects, peer-group activities, and proselytizing about Balanced Literacy?

Nor is constructivism on its way out. Constructivist classrooms are not only alive and well, but are growing in number, and the only way to reverse the tide is to ensure that all children—especially those who depend most on their local public schools for their daily education—have feasible, content-rich, direct instruction alternatives.

This does not mean putting powerful politicians and business leaders in charge of our schools, or imposing high-stakes testing. But it does mean choice—real choice—of the sort that most of our school children have yet to enjoy, and against which Ravitch has yet to argue convincingly.

Citation: Beals, K. (2011). The death and life of the great American school system, Book review. *Nonpartisan Education Review / Reviews* 7(1)

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