

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

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My support for NCLB remained strong until November 30, 2006. I can pinpoint the date exactly because that was the day I realized that NCLB was a failure.

(Diane Ravitch, p. 99)

Those words appear on page 99, which however odd a starting point, is critical. I learned about this event contemporaneously from the late Gerald Bracey, who informed some of us by email and many more in a Huffington Post blog. At a conference at the American Enterprise Institute called to answer the question whether

No Child Left Behind was working, it was learned that former assistant secretary of education for G. H. W. Bush, Diane Ravitch, declared that the answer to the conference title's question was clearly, "No!"


First, let me dispense with any necessary disclosures. My professional association with Diane Ravitch goes back almost a decade to when as a graduate student studying Federal educational policy I was fortunate enough to have an extended phone conversation picking her brain. Our contact has become more frequent especially in the past year, in part as a result of her transformation, a process she thoroughly explores in her first chapter, "What I Learned About School Reform." As a result of at least one of those exchanges, I am included in the acknowledgments as one who assisted Ravitch in obtaining information. I was aware of the general thrust of the book, but until I received a copy to review had no knowledge of the specific contents.

Diane Ravitch has been a major figure on educational policy for several decades. She is by training an educational historian, having done her dissertation at Columbia, beginning her association with Lawrence Cremin, perhaps the preeminent historian of education. Ravitch had first begun writing about schools in the late 1960s, during a period of turmoil in NYC public schools over the struggle between centralization and decentralization. Ravitch went back and examined the history of New York's schools to find out why they had become centralized, not only discovering relevant material but becoming thereby the most knowledgeable person about the history of NYC schools. In the process she demonstrated something that has been a characteristic of all of her scholarly work - she thoroughly examines all relevant material so that her conclusions are strongly supported by fact.
Ravitch was critical of some of the radical reformers of the period of the 1970s, some of whom were very harsh on public education. This began the process of turning her into something of a target for those on the educational and political left. Ravitch will now acknowledge that some of the viewpoints she espoused over the next few decades are things she no longer believes. She had supported some ideas because of what she saw as their promise, but as she notes in that first chapter (which is a product in part of the happenstance of cleaning out her office and thus having the opportunity to examine the work of several decades) “my views changed as I saw how those ideas were working out in reality.” (p. 2) She offers a possibly apocryphal remark by Keynes explaining that when the facts changed, he changed his mind.

I think in fairness to Ravitch it is important to note several things. First, she has never been a Republican, even when she served in the Bush 41 administration under Lamar Alexander at Education. She was a Democrat and is now an independent. Second, she has an absolutely consistent and strong position with respect to public schools - she wants to see them not only maintained, but thriving. Third, having grown up in Houston and seen how some of her teachers were bullied by right-wing organizations, she is a firm supporter of the due process rights unions provide teachers. Let me offer several quotes from the chapter with a title derived from a teacher influential in her own life, who would perhaps not be highly valued by some so-called "reformers" of our day, "What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?" First,

No one, to my knowledge, has demonstrated a clear, indisputable correlation between teacher unionism and academic achievement, either negative or positive. (p. 75)

And if we consider the kinds of international comparisons used by "reformers" to denigrate American public schools, these words will be quite relevant:

Some of the top-performing nations in the world are highly unionized, others are not. Finland, whose students score highest on international
assessments of reading, has a teacher workforce that is nearly 100 percent unionized. Most high-performing Asian nations do not have large proportions of unionized teachers (though some do). Unionization per se does not cause high student achievement, nor does it cause low achievement. (p. 75)

I will not fully recapitulate her entire career. You can get a sense either from a Wikipedia article\(^1\) or from the resume at her website.\(^2\) She worked in a Republican administration. She had an association with the Hoover Institution. She has maintained friendly relations with people who many in the more progressive educational circles in which I participate despise, whether it is educational economist Eric Hanushek or her former fellow Assistant Secretary Checker Finn. Yet rather than presume that such associations are the complete indication of her orientation, she now jointly blogs with Deborah Meier, and among those she acknowledges helping her with the book by reading are Linda Darling-Hammond, education journalist Linda Perlstein, former New York Times education writer Richard Rothstein, and Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters (a strong opponent of things like mayoral control)—none of these would be considered favorites of those on either the political or educational right.

And yet it is precisely because of her associations with those more “conservative” on educational matters that this book by Diane Ravitch carries the impact that it does. It may infuriate some of her former colleagues, because she is thorough, she is blunt. Were I to offer a parallel, perhaps it would be the conversion of David Brock from a henchman for the political right to one of its more visible opponents. Except Brock was never considered a major player, and in educational circles Ravitch has been a major figure for several decades.

Let me focus on the book. Let me start by saying that I cannot hope to cover all of its value even in a piece several

\(^1\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Ravitch
\(^2\) http://www.dianeravitch.com/vita.html
times as long as this will be. I want to give a sense of the book—its structure, some of the key issues covered therein. That also means I want to give a sense of Ravitch. I hope thereby to persuade you that is a book of critical importance. Here I note that while the publisher had apparently requested reviews not appear until March 1, the day before the book is publicly available for sale, there were already a number of reviews available before the embargo date. I am sure there will be many more reviews as well.

Here is the list of chapters:

  1. What I Learned About School Reform
  2. Hijacked! How the Standards Movement Turned Into the Testing Movement
  3. The Transformation of District 2
  4. Lessons from San Diego
  5. The Business Model in New York City
  6. NCLB: Measure and Punish
  7. Choice: The Story of an Idea
  8. The Trouble with Accountability
  9. What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?
  10. The Billionaire Boys Club
  11. Lessons Learned

Chapter 3 is a detailed study of the reform efforts in one New York City regional school district. As it happens, the person responsible for those efforts, Anthony Alvarado, then went to San Diego, which leads logically into Chapter 4. New York City is the current model of mayoral control, and re-imported some of what had happened in San Diego—despite the fact that, as Ravitch clearly demonstrates, those "reforms" in San Diego provided no better performance than most of the rest of the state.

Of course, the reform in New York is led by a billionaire, Michael Bloomberg. That provides at least some connections with Chapter 10, where Ravitch thoroughly examines the efforts of several other billionaires, individuals and families, who have been using their wealth through their foundations to shape American education in ways that have been excluding the voices of the people whose schools are being reshaped and the teachers who work in such schools. That
chapter is worthy of an entirely separate posting to see up close the influence of Eli Broad, Bill and Melinda Gates, and the Walton family. Some of those names appear elsewhere in the book, especially in San Diego, and in discussing the issue of choice.

Let me offer some selections of the author's words on a couple of topics. For example, after looking at San Diego and mayoral control in New York, (both districts in which control was given to former prosecutors with no prior educational experience, Alan Bersin in San Diego and Joel Klein in New York), examining the data from what studies are available, Ravitch offers the following conclusion:

Mayoral control is not a guaranteed path to school improvement. On the 2007 NAEP, the cities with the highest scores were Charlotte, North Carolina, and Austin Texas, neither of which had mayoral control. And two of the three lowest performing cities - Chicago and Cleveland - had mayoral control for more than a decade. Clearly many factors affect educational performance other than the governance structure. (p. 91)

These words carry a powerful punch. Might I remind readers that the current administration unfortunately seems to favor mayoral control. Secretary Education Arne Duncan was CEO of Chicago public schools from 2001 until he joined the Obama administration, thus the NAEP evaluation that showed Chicago public schools in such a poor light happened on his watch.

Ravitch offers a further criticism of mayoral control on the same page. She writes of such control,

It solves no problems to exclude parents and the public from important decisions about education policy or to disregard the educators who work with students daily. Public education is a vital institution in our democratic society, and its governance must be democratic, open to public discussion and public participation. (p. 91)
Here you see something that has been an essential part of Ravitch's approach to education throughout her career, one too often not noticed by those who criticized her positions on some issues or her associations. It is a constant theme in the book, to which she returns again and again. Thus we read in her final chapter,

Schools do not exist in isolation. They are part of the larger society. Schooling requires the active participation of many, including students, families, public officials, local organizations, and the larger community. (p. 239)

This is why Ravitch finds it necessary to remind us that we cannot hold teachers accountable for test scores in isolation from the responsibilities of others, including the students themselves. It is why she raises real questions about any approach that excludes participation in shaping educational policy and governing schools by parents and the community. In the penultimate paragraph of her book she writes

Our public education system is a fundamental element of our democratic society. Our public schools have been the pathway to opportunity and a better life for generations of Americans, giving them the tools to fashion their own life and to improve the commonweal. To the extent we strengthen them, we strengthen our democracy. (pp. 241-242)

Policies that undercut public schools, and thus weaken our democracy, are things that Ravitch opposes, and against which she now forcefully advocates.

Thus we can understand her changing position on school choice. She reminds us that charters as originally proposed were not institutions to be run by for profit entities. Ray Budde and Albert Shanker both offered proposals in 1988, the former wanting schools run within districts by groups of teachers with specific goals to be evaluated at the end of three to five years, the latter also run by teachers within regular schools in order "to pursue innovative ways of educating disaffected students." Ravitch reminds us that by
1993 Shanker had withdrawn his support of charters and become a vocal critic.

We now know that when we control for all factors there is no evidence that charters as a whole perform better than public schools. We have seen charter schools and some for choice public schools find ways of excluding the harder to educate. Close examination shows, as Ravitch reminds us, that some charters are able to obtain success because the charters often get additional financial resources from their corporate sponsors, enabling them to offer smaller classes, after-school and enrichment activities, and laptop computers for every student. Many charter schools enforce discipline codes that would likely be challenged in court if they were adopted in regular public schools; and because charter schools are schools of choice, they find it easier to avoid, eliminate, or counsel out low-performing and disruptive students. (pp. 136-137)

A recent study out of Stanford analyzed data from 2,403 charters. Ravitch quotes the principal author, economist Margaret Raymond, as saying "If this study shows anything, it show that we've got a two-to-one margin of bad charters to good charters." That would seem to demonstrate a lack of data to justify large-scale expansion of charters, and yet Secretary Duncan and President Obama are insisting on just such an expansion as a requirement in Race to the Top funding. One who reads the book carefully will discover this is no anomaly. Ravitch makes clear what people should have known: there is no research base supporting any of the provisions so-called "reformers" advocate—not for charters, not for merit pay for teachers, not for using test scores as the sole measure of the performance of teachers and schools, not for approaches such as those advocated by Teach for America for teachers nor New Leaders for New Schools for principals…. That Ravitch shows this clearly will not endear her to former colleagues at places like the Hoover Institution, American Enterprise Institute, or the Fordham Foundation (on whose board she once served).
Ravitch also warns that the ability of charters to exclude the harder to educate will create "a two-tier system of widening inequality." Some charters will continue to show success, and because the more motivated families will opt out, we will have a spiral where the scores of those left behind in the public schools will continue to decline. As Ravitch notes, "This would be an ominous development for public schools and for our nation." (p. 145)

As noted, some "success" of charter schools is a direct result of the intervention of corporate interests and foundations of wealthy people. These are issues that repeatedly come up, throughout the book. Thus in San Diego, when one school board member was opposed to what Alan Bersin was attempting to do, Frances Zimmerman found herself a target. At a time when the typical school board race cost $40,000,

... leading business figures in the city contributed over $700,000 to defeat Zimmerman. Walmart heir John Walton of Arkansas, a supporter of charter schools and vouchers, and Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad each contributed more than $100,000 to the anti-Zimmerman campaign. (p. 55)

In this case Zimmerman survived, although she remained in the minority on a pro-Bersin board.

This kind of intervention by the wealthy should be of great concern, and Ravitch fully takes it on. In Chapter 10, she traces the history of the involvement of charitable foundations in public education, and provides close scrutiny of the major players today. This chapter alone would justify buying and reading the book. You will see in the detail the roles of the major players, including but not limited to the owners of Walmart, Bill Gates, and Eli Broad. You will see not only direct contributions but also further contributions through other foundations. Let me offer four selections, two from the portion on the Walton family, and two more general.

As one reviews the contributions made by the Walton family Foundation, it is obvious that the
family members seek to create, sustain, and promote alternatives to public education. Their agenda is choice, competition and privatization. (p. 203)

But why should it be surprising that a foundation owned by one of the richest families in the United States opposes government regulation and favors private sector solutions to social problems? Why should it be surprising that a global corporation that has thrived without a unionized workforce would oppose public sector unions? Nor should it be surprising that the Walton Family Foundation has an ideological commitment to the principle of consumer choice and to an unfettered market, which by its nature has no loyalties and disregards Main Street, traditional values, long-established communities, and neighborhood schools. (p. 203)

After similar deconstructions of the role of the foundations of Gates and Broad, Ravitch provides a couple of succinct summaries. First,

The market is not the best way to deliver public services. Just as every neighborhood should have a good public school. Privatizing our public schools makes as much sense as privatizing the fire department or the police department. It is possible, but it is not wise. Our society needs a sensible balance between public and private. (p. 221)

After noting the power and money now arrayed against public schools and education as a profession, and reminding us of the devastation wrought by financial deregulation, Ravitch cautions us

Removing public oversight will leave the education of our children to the whim of entrepreneurs and financiers. Nor is it wise to entrust our schools to inexperienced teachers, principals, and superintendents. Education is too important to
relinquish to the vagaries of the market and the
good intentions of amateurs. (p. 222)

There is so much more of value in this book. In her final chapter Ravitch is very blunt, warning that what we are doing in educational policy is quite likely to make the schools less effective and further degrade the intellectual capacity of the nation’s citizens. She does offer some specific suggestions which are worth considering, although I think the real power of the book comes from how she takes apart so much of what recent educational policy has been doing.

There is in the final chapter a series of statements, each of which begins the same way: “Our schools……” If you take nothing else from this review, the list that follows should convince you of the value of the book.

“Our schools…

... will not improve if we continually reorganize their structure and management without regard for their essential purpose
... will not improve if elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that properly should be made by professional educators
... will not improve if we value only what tests measure
... will not improve if we rely exclusively on tests as the means of deciding the fate of students, teachers, principals, and schools
... will not improve if we continue to close neighborhood schools in the name of reform
... will not improve if we entrust them to the magical powers of the market
... cannot improve if charter schools siphon away the most motivated students and their families in the poorest communities from the regular public schools
... will not improve if we expect them to act like private, profit-seeking enterprises
... will not improve if we continue to drive away experienced principals and replace them with neophytes who have taken a leadership training course but have little or no experience
as teachers
... cannot be improved by blind worship of data
... cannot be improved by those who say money doesn't matter
... cannot be improved if we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children's ability to learn
... cannot be improved if we use them as society's all-purpose punching bag, blaming them for all the ills of the economy, the burdens imposed upon children by poverty, the dysfunction of families, and the erosion of civility.
Schools must work with other institutions and cannot replace them.” (pp. 225-229 et passim)

Given the prominence of Diane Ravitch, this book cannot be ignored. Because of her previous positions and associations, her clarion rejection of the entire "reform" agenda that is unfortunately continuing in the present administration will hopefully cause some in positions of responsibility to take several deep breaths, step back, and perhaps reconsider what they are doing.

She is likely to be attacked by those who will consider themselves former allies now being betrayed. About that I can do nothing. That they will be upset is to me a positive thing, for what they have advocated is damaging to our schools and our nation.

I hope in this review I have convinced you of the importance and the power of this book. It is yet another book about which I can say that anyone concerned about public schools should read - or in this case, devour. It is that good, that rich, that important.

Ravitch ends her book as follows:
At the present time, public education is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. We must turn attention to improving schools, infusing them with the substance of genuine learning and reviving the conditions that make learning possible. (p. 242)
Perhaps you think I should conclude with those words. I cannot. Even as I value them, I must remind you that I have barely scratched the surface of the riches of the book.

Rather, I want to turn back to how Ravitch concludes her introductory chapter, in which she explains the intent of the book. She acknowledges that she does not have all the answers, she offers no silver bullet or magic potion. She does claim that

...we must preserve American public education, because it is so intimately connected to our concepts of citizenship and democracy and to the promise of American life. In view of the money and power now arrayed on behalf of the ideas and programs that I will criticize, I hope it is not too late. (p. 14)

So do I!

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including Current Issues in Education and Teachers College Record. He is coauthor of Rothenberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (July, 2001). No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's education proposals. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies.