



Get Schooled



Diane Ravitch: Education has become search and destroy mission and teachers are often the targets

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Diane Ravitch, perhaps America's most influential scholar on education, has reversed her stance on issues such as standardized testing, school choice and the No Child Left Behind Act.



In her new book, influential education scholar Diane Ravitch criticizes policies she once supported. (Photo/Jack Miller)

It's the equivalent of Neal Boortz renouncing the FairTax or Ted Nugent embracing a tofu and berries diet.

That change of heart has sent Ravitch's new book, "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" flying out of bookstores in its first week on the shelves. Ravitch can't keep up with e-mails pouring in from grateful teachers.

"The groundswell is because there are a lot of teachers who are very upset because nobody has been listening to them, nobody has been standing up to say, 'Wait a minute. Is all this testing getting us anywhere?'"

"The whole point of testing now is to find out who we should punish," says Ravitch, speaking by telephone from her home in New York. "If kids get low test scores, then you should figure out why and what you can do to help. Now, we figure out who is to blame and how fast can we punish them."

A former assistant secretary of education under the first President Bush and a noted education historian, Ravitch cheered the sweeping No Child Left Behind Act when it was introduced by the second President Bush. (Ravitch was also a consultant to Georgia on its new social studies standards.)

"As I was reading all the complex complaints about how schools can't do this, it's too hard, it costs too much, etc., I thought to myself, 'what the law says is that the schools will teach all kids from third to eighth grade to read and do grade-appropriate math. How impossible is that?'" she said back in 2003.

Seven years later, she says the act asked for the impossible by making teachers accountable for student performance factors that are well beyond their control, including poverty and absence of parental support.

By overemphasizing test scores, No Child Left Behind sounded a death knell for arts education and anything else that wasn't tested, she now believes. It focused too much on basic skills to the exclusion of thinking skills. It did not require that states develop well-rounded, meaningful curricula and rather than raise standards, it lowered them.

But Ravitch does not want to discard the law entirely, believing that its provisions on using data to identify struggling students and provide them with help is worth retaining. “But get all the punishment out of the law,” she says.

However, most of the policies fostered by the second President Bush in the law and maintained by Barack Obama won’t improve schools, she says.

“The schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives, to be responsible citizens, and to make good choices for themselves, their families, and our society.”

This from a scholar the New York Daily News commended in 2004 as the champion of “high-pressure, high-stakes standardized testing.”

Ravitch now says schools are better at churning out data than they are at producing educated students. And she cites the purported cheating on Georgia’s CRCT as a by-product of a testing culture gone mad.

“Take graduation rates. If I am a high school principal and you tell me that I’m fired if I don’t get a 100 percent graduation rate, I will get 100 percent and you will get kids coming out of school who won’t be able to read and write,” she says. “But I will still hand them a diploma.”

A longtime critic of education fads, Ravitch says that at first she didn’t realize that No Child Left Behind was just another of those fads.

She also identifies two other fads — choice and charter schools — that will also fail to create lasting improvement in schools.

She admits being seduced by the rhetoric of choice.

“In part, I was swept along by my immersion in the upper reaches of the first Bush presidency, where choice and competition were taken for granted as successful ways to improve student achievement,” she says.

But the data have not supported that assumption. She cites Milwaukee’s 20-year voucher experiment, which she contends has helped neither the neediest students nor the public schools left behind.

She’s grown disenchanted with the charter-school movement as well.

While such schools often do enroll poor students, they tend to attract those students who are already the most motivated, since many of the schools require lotteries for admission. She notes that New York City Chancellor Joel Klein is among those smitten with charters. He wants to see 10 percent of the city’s students in charters.

“Who is talking about the other 90 percent?” she says. “When you look at the results for charters, you can always find one with great results and another with terrible results. On the whole they don’t have better results than regular public schools.”

As an historian, Ravitch cites experience to warn that the current push for charter schools is dangerous.

“What is stunningly successful in a small setting, nurtured by its founders and brought to life by a cadre of passionate teachers, seldom survives the transition when it’s turned into a large school reform.”

A few years ago, I heard Ravitch asked whether testing was good. Her answer was succinct: “Depends on the test.”

She reiterated that theme in her book and in our interview, saying that the problem lies with the misuse of tests, not the tests themselves. Tests provide too narrow a gauge for promoting students, assessing teachers or grading schools, all of which require a wider lens.

<http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2010/03/05/diane-ravitch-education-has-become-search-and-destroy-mission-and-teachers-are-the-targets/>

Tests were never designed to gauge such things, she argues. They were designed to see whether students could read or do math. Even then, tests have limits and must be tempered with human judgment.

Furthermore, tests have become a club to bludgeon teachers who need respect much more than they need punishment.

“Teacher quality is very important,” she says. “The answer is to professionalize teaching, not to ignore experience and all credentials and just fire people if they don’t produce high test results.”

She also frowns on the infatuation with Teach for America and other fast-track programs that put untrained college graduates in the classroom. That model — young people working 60 to 70 hours a week for a few years — is never going to create the depth and breadth of teaching force necessary, she says.

Merit pay, another education fad, also draws her disapproval. In her view, it has not improved student performance and has become another way to beat up on teachers.

In her book, she celebrates her own favorite teacher, Ruby Ratliff — gruff, demanding, indifferent to a student’s self-esteem and stingy with her A’s.

“We now have so much emphasis on test scores,” she says, “that it would probably drive somebody like that out of the profession today.”