

Education in the Age of Neoliberalism:

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

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NEH Seminar, Boston, July 2014

In her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein argued that free-market advocates seek to capitalize on instability and disruption, from political upheavals to natural disasters. When old orders were disrupted as a result of Latin American political turmoil, a broken levee in New Orleans, or a “shock and awe” bombing campaign in Iraq, predatory businesses stood in wait, positioning themselves to rebuild a new, profit-generating order on the wreckage. If education historian Diane Ravitch’s latest book is correct, we are witnessing the application of a similar logic and set of practices to America’s public school system. In *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*, Ravitch argues that a handful of corporate reformers have crafted a new, false controlling narrative about our schools: public schools are failing; this failure threatens our nation’s security; free-market principles can fix the problem. According to Ravitch, however, there is no crisis. The very people who stand to profit from dismantling the public school system have manufactured, packaged, and sold the American people a lie.

As a noted education historian, former Assistant Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush, and author of nearly two dozen books on education, Ravitch possesses expertise within both academe and the more reified world of educational policy. An architect and supporter of the national standards movement and Bush’s No Child Left Behind, she distanced herself from the initiative and its insistence on the unattainable goal of 100% proficiency in math and reading, seeing something nefarious lurking behind it. She wrote, “The 2014 goal is a timetable for the demolition of public education in the United States. The goal of 100 percent proficiency has placed thousands

of public schools at risk of being privatized, turned into charters, or closed.”¹ In response to a perceived creeping corporate restructuring of public education, in 2010 Ravitch wrote *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, in which she took on what she called the “billionaire boys club”: the Walton Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Gates Foundation. These foundations, she argued, have pumped billions of dollars into restructuring the public education system in an attempt to weaken its foundations for corporate gain. *Reign of Error* picks up where her last book left off, expanding on many of the same arguments, while offering counter-solutions to strengthen and improve America’s public schools.

While she may have cut her teeth writing for the academy, *Reign of Error* was written for a popular audience. In fact, the book can best be understood as a rallying cry to her base and potential converts to her cause to reclaim the promise of public education as a social good, free from the machinations of corporate reformers. To accomplish this, she sometimes uses a broad, powerful brush to paint an unflattering, but ultimately honest portrait of the corporate reformers and their mission.

But what separates today’s brand of education reform from past attempts to reform or improve public education? Ravitch writes that, “what is happening now is an astonishing development. It is not meant to reform public education but is a deliberate attempt to replace public education with a privately managed, free-market system of schooling.”² This is a far cry from past educational initiatives or philosophies, like the “Life Adjustment” movement of the 1940s that sought to align schools with the demands

¹ “Stop the Madness,” National Education Association, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.nea.org/home/39774.htm>

² Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 4.

of the world of work. According to Ravitch, the corporate reformers like the Broad, Gates, and Walton Foundations, along with a host of technology companies and for-profit school management companies aren't working to simply adjust or enhance public education, but to destroy it and reap a profit on its ashes. To accomplish this goal, corporate reformers have constructed a simple narrative that blames bad teachers and union bureaucracy for the failures of public education, while aggressively pushing vouchers, school choice, and online education.

Attacks from corporate reformers have come on many levels, from the popular to the legislative. While films like Guggenheim's *Waiting for Superman* have popularized ideas beneficial to corporate reformers by attacking teachers and their unions, groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) work to influence governmental policy. Promoting privatization and free market principles, ALEC writes model legislation that has gained support in right-leaning states. This legislation promotes charters, online learning, and vouchers, while attacking unions and teacher tenure laws. But the threats don't come just from the right. Obama dashed the hopes of many educators with his Race to the Top competition that encouraged charters and common standards and tests that would later be used to evaluate teachers. Not only was the Race to the Top initiative in line with the stated aims of conservative education leaders in its endorsement of choice and competition, it "abandoned equity as the driving principle of federal aid."³ This competition for grant money was skewed in favor of states that looked to the Gates Foundation for help "restructuring" their educational goals. Seeing an opportunity for profit, it also brought a slew of entrepreneurs into the education market

³ Ibid., 15.

ready to train teachers, offer “data-driven” services, and promises to turn around failing schools. With the Common Core State Standards initiative, publishers, consultants, and testing companies fought to cash in by selling services and new materials to districts. Joanne Weiss, Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s chief of staff, wrote glowingly that, “The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. ... The adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.”⁴ Taken in total, these reforms and initiatives effectively created a bonanza for a private sector that scurried to cash in.

Ravitch expertly pieces together the disparate threads of this story to paint a picture of a treasured American institution under siege. What adds to her narrative’s credibility is its utter believability in light of recent efforts to challenge as unsustainable and ultimately privatize social security; a growing chorus of elected officials who suggest that the US Postal Service be broken up and privatized; and the broad assaults on unions through “Right to Work” legislation and the related maneuvering of Republican senators in Ohio and Wisconsin. In other words, attempts to privatize public education are one piece of a national privatization and union-busting effort that has gained traction in recent years. As rates of unionization decline, so do wages; as a result, corporate profits rise.

After identifying and unmasking the corporate reformers, Ravitch goes on to systematically deconstruct their claims. While the corporate reformers’ narrative hinges, in part, on declining test scores in US schools, Ravitch points to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to show that students’ scores are, in fact, rising in

⁴ Ibid., 17.

reading and mathematics. Similarly, she shows that the high school graduation rate has steadily increased since the 1970s to between 75 and 78 percent; however, if you include students who have received GEDs, roughly 90% of students age 18 to 24 have a high school diploma in the United States.⁵ She goes on to convincingly debunk the “junk science” of merit pay for teacher performance, highlight the lackluster results of high profile reformers like Michelle Rhee, and the mixed results of charter and online schools. She writes that charters “may offer an escape hatch for some poor children, as public schools always have, but [they] leave intact the sources of inequality.”⁶ Despite her assault on the reformers, Ravitch does recognize that harmful disparities continue to exist within our current educational model.

Even with the remarkable progress made to close our nation’s achievement gap over the past few decades, disparities remain. 83 percent of black fourth graders scored “below basic” in 1990. By 2011, that number had dramatically dropped to 49 percent compared to 9 percent for white students.⁷ While the gap clearly persists, Ravitch insists that it can and should be largely attributed to poverty, suggesting that there is only so much the schools can do to create parity. To call these clear successes a failure is to echo the crisis mentality of the reformers.

Running through Ravitch’s indictment is a focus on what she sees as the crux of the matter- poverty. Where poor and failing schools continue to exist, we see communities of poverty. Poverty, she rightly points out, is highly correlated with low academic achievement. This is a global problem that is not specific to US schools.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

Ravitch cites research showing that, "...even in high-performing nations such as Finland, South Korea, and Canada, the achievement levels of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds fall short of their more advantaged peers. The gap between poor and advantaged students is greatest...where income inequality is greatest."⁸ Naturally, those countries with a more social democratic orientation, like Finland and the Netherlands, see the smallest achievement gaps. In other words, class disparities correlate to disparities in academic achievement. As Harvard's Howard Gardner recognizes, "No one can education students effectively if most of the students come from homes that are seriously troubled."⁹ It is safe to say that American poverty, which far surpasses the poverty found in other industrialized, western countries, constitutes a form of "serious trouble". So what is to be done?

Ravitch works to turn the reformers narrative- that bad schools perpetuate poverty- on its head: "Poverty persists not because schools are bad and teachers don't care but because society neglects its root causes. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are social problems, not school problems. Schools don't cause poverty and racial segregation, or can schools solve these problems on their own."¹⁰ Here she looks to the Great Society programs of the 1960s as a model to which we should return, noting research that shows that these reforms did, in fact, work to significantly shrink the black-white reading gap. Her solutions, couched in the context of a revitalized commitment to public services and a recognition of public education as a social responsibility, include: prenatal care, early childhood education, a rich and diverse curriculum, smaller class

⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁹ Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 192.

¹⁰ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 224.

sizes, the banning of for-profit charters and a return to the charter movement's original goals, wraparound services, the end of high-stakes testing, the professionalization of teaching, and strategies to reduce segregation in the schools.

Ravitch's solutions are clear, but her strategy for achieving such a macro-level shift in orientation is not. After years of attacks, union and teacher demonization can not be effectively challenged simply by strengthening the teachers unions as advocates for the teaching profession without further eroding an already skeptical public's trust.

Similarly, it is not enough to raise awareness as Ravitch has done- awareness must be tied to concrete action. Challenging the corporate reformers' narrative, with its indictment of greedy unions and ineffective teachers, will require the support of parents and students.

As Sara Mosle pointed out in her *Atlantic* review of *Reign of Error*, it was not too long ago that Ravitch suggested that, "If my child were in a school where he was not learning I would not wait for a gathering of social scientists to tell me whether it was okay for me to put him in another school." Whereas Mosle interprets Ravitch's work as "divisive", I see it as incomplete. Parents will respond most enthusiastically to attainable solutions that meet their material needs. It is precisely these parents and children- the ones featured in films like *Waiting for Superman*- the ones making the most noise in their communities to challenge their failing schools- that must be enlisted in the fight to defend public education if teachers and their unions are to succeed in shifting the balance.

Ravitch falls short in her prescriptions in that she does not address the immediate needs of parents and students in failing schools who are looking for an alternative.

Similarly, while her proposed reforms are laudable and necessary, they do not provide room to immediately engage students and their parents in her fight. High performing

charters do seem like a sensible alternative to a family forced to attend a failing school. To attract the public and ultimately win the reforms Ravitch proposes, the goal and work of the unions must change to go beyond the limited concerns of its membership to adopt a social movement, community oriented, unionism. The recent work of the Chicago Teachers Union in mobilizing community allies serves a successful example of this kind of outreach. In a recent CTU strike, the slogan, “our working conditions are your child's learning conditions”, captured that sensibility. In the months leading up to the strike, CTU’s rank and file educators enlisted the support of parents in their fight, framing their action as a last resort defense against corporate incursion and the dismantling of community schools. Instead of looking for “superman” in the charter schools and promises of the reformers, parents came to see teachers and their unions as allies. While CTU pointed the way, much work will need to be done to revitalize the teachers unions along these lines. However, as the Democratic Party, a traditional ally of the teachers unions, continues to throw its support behind the corporate reformers, the unions may find themselves with no alternative.

Despite the absence of an actionable plan, Ravitch’s book is necessary and welcome at this unprecedented moment in US education. Like John Dewey and Horace Mann, she challenges us to recall the purpose and necessity of quality public education in a democratic society. In that respect, this book should be read and referred back to by all who care about the fate of this experiment in democracy. Jefferson rightly noted that “an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” As a precondition of living in a free society, every child should have access to quality public education in schools that are concerned first and foremost with their well-being and the benefits of a

rich curriculum. This renewed focus on the *commons*, not the application of business and free-market models, should be the driving force behind our education policy.