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**Book Review: *Reign of Error The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* Diane Ravitch, 2013**

Shortly after the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, the senate narrowly confirmed Betsy DeVos as the nation's Secretary of Education. This appointment was possibly the most controversial of a host of Trump's controversial cabinet picks. Opponents cited several issues with DeVos' selection. Among their concerns were her advocacy of charter schools and voucher programs, her seeming comfortableness with the intertwining of religion and public education, her views on issues surrounding gay and transgender students, and her stances on issues related to teachers. Additionally, they voiced alarm with her apparent lack of qualifications and experience for the position.

While I agree DeVos is not the next coming of Horace Mann, and while I also believe she was a poor choice for what should be an important position, the fact that she was chosen should not have been a shock. If one examines the events of the years leading up to her selection as Education Secretary, her selection seems like the logical next step. I would argue she is more qualified than her two immediate predecessors, Arne Duncan and John King. Duncan's education experience consisted of "helping out" at

his mother's after-school program, and being appointed as "CEO" of the Chicago Public schools, with dubious qualifications at best. His reign as CPS CEO was not a successful one by most measures. John King was first appointed as New York State Education Commissioner by Governor Cuomo, before being tapped to replace Duncan. King basically built his resume by bouncing from charter school to charter school. (His experience does include management positions with Uncommon Schools organization, and as a founder of the Roxbury Prep Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts). He left New York while its fledgling teacher evaluation program was a mess. What I am arguing is former President Obama seems to have gotten a pass with poor picks for Secretary of Education, but the same action by President Trump is supposed to be a crisis. DeVos is not the first player to swoop in to "save" America's educational system; there have been a host of saviors (or snake oil salesmen, depending on your view) over at least the last twenty years.

Fortunately, educational historian Diane Ravitch has written a book, Reign of Error, that examines the claims made by education reformers, which helps one determine if America's public schools are truly in dire straits, or, if a lot of what is espoused by the reformers are solutions in need of a problem.

Ravitch comes from an interesting background to be a counter voice of the education reform community. She served as Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H. W. Bush from 1991-1993. She had been a supporter of testing and choice, and was an early supporter of No Child Left Behind. However, she basically has switched sides in the struggle between the established

system and the education reformers. Overall, she believes American schools need improvement, but does not label them as failures, and is generally supportive of teachers and teachers' unions. She believes the charter school movement is financed by right-wing groups to destroy public schools and unions, and to make money in the process.

The book consists of 33 chapters, but its content can be divided into five major areas. These topics are: Corporate Reform, Facts, Teachers and Related Topics, Charter Schools, and students. Many issues are related in various ways, and are discussed in more than one chapter.

In Reign of Error, Ravitch traces the slow beginnings of the reform movement. She stated the first Bush Administration didn't want a large federal role in education, but allowed small, mostly volunteer initiatives such as America 2000. President Clinton was interested in national standards, and national testing, but the Republican Congress showed little interest. The ball really started rolling under President George W. Bush. His enactment of NCLB, with support from officials such as Senator Edward M. Kennedy, began the era of federal involvement in testing, and accountability. Ravitch describes the big industry that grew along with the implementation of NCLB. Private sector interests discovered ways to capitalize on testing programs, tutoring programs, etc. (Ravitch, throughout the book describes some of these more as schemes , rather than programs). Ravitch exposes some of these corporate reformers as clever at creating appealing names for their efforts (Black Alliance for Educational Options, Chiefs for Change, and Democrats for Education reform, among others). She asserts

that their efforts are largely about themselves, and she rightly points out that politically, the group includes both Republicans and Democrats.

Ravitch quickly dismisses the reformers' claims that test scores are falling. She presents solid evidence that test scores among American students are actually at their highest ever. She mostly relies on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to bolster her argument. She points out that the NAEP has measured student achievement over time in both reading and math, giving it more credibility than newer "tests". Ravitch does not dismiss the notion of an achievement gap, but she counters some reformers' assertion that black and hispanic students have not made any progress. Somewhat ironically, according to Ravitch, black students saw their greatest academic gains during the 1970s and 1980s, attributing this to things such as desegregation, smaller class sizes, early childhood education, and more federal resources to schools enrolling poor children. As Ravitch extolls throughout the book, American schools did not cause the achievement gap, and schools can't eliminate it alone.

The area of American success (or lack of) on international tests is an area that seems to really get Ravitch incensed. This is the first of several instances where the author asks why, if American students have been doing so poorly on tests compared to other nations, our country is a leader in achievements in areas such as medicine and technology, among others. She points out that when similar groups are tested, the United States actually shines in many tests internationally. Ravitch also examines high school and college graduation rates in the United States. She does not see a problem

here, or at least not a crisis. She provides evidence of steady improvement of the high school graduation rate. Her analysis of the college graduation rate is more complicated. We are not a leader in this statistic, but she's not sure we need to be. While she supports increasing the college graduation rate, she doesn't see college as a one size fits all way to success. Even here, she points to issues such as childhood poverty as being at the root. From my standpoint, some of these comparisons don't serve much of a purpose.

It is in the area of teachers and their effectiveness where Ravitch really comes through (which shouldn't be a surprise, we are talking about schools). Reformers want effective teachers in the nation's schools. They want these teachers, but don't want tenure, professional level salaries, or allowing teachers some level of autonomy. She attacks the unfairness of using test scores to measure a teacher's effectiveness, rightly pointing out that each teacher has different students. She wants teachers evaluated on other contributions as well, such as mentoring, teamwork, and collaboration. She dismisses merit pay as both hard to implement, and proven over time not to work. She cites plenty of evidence, but rightly states that it is an idea that won't go away. I find it so ironic that some of the privateers state that money doesn't fix the problems in education. First, where else in the United States does money not matter? Also, if money shouldn't be important to schools and teachers, why is it so important to so many of the reformers? An examination of the extravagant salaries of some of these people proves my point.

Ravitch devotes an entire chapter to “Teach for America”. Teach for America selects applicants from predominantly “elite” colleges to teach in predominantly disadvantaged urban schools, after a few weeks of summer training. The program’s founder, Wendy Kopp dismisses the idea that poverty plays a role in poor student performance, that her recruits are so effective, poverty does not factor. Of course Kopp is no expert on poverty, she pulls down at least \$400,000 annually as CEO of the group. Ravitch easily destroys the ludicrous claim that poverty doesn’t affect student achievement, with studies that contradict it. The program has been variously described as a jobs program for privileged young people and a way for under accomplished Ivy League graduates, and their parents to feel special. As an analogy, she points out the sheer lunacy of letting people be doctors or nurses without any meaningful training. (Even a fry person at McDonald’s arguably gets more training than TFA teachers). The notion that people should entrust their children to such ill-prepared teachers personally alarms me. We are supposed to be serious about education and education reform, aren’t we?

That a lot of Ravitch’s attention is paid to Teach for America raises a question. TFAs teach a very small percentage of the nation’s students, but get a lot of press. Why? It has been proven in this book, and in numerous studies that TFAs are not getting great results. I believe it has to do with the organization’s obsession with fundraising for themselves, and the disproportionate number of them who have landed high-level, well-paying administrative positions. Ravitch outlines the sad saga of Michelle Rhee, a TFA alum. In a few short years as a second grade teacher in Baltimore, Rhee’s students basically went from worst to first on standardized tests. The fact that she was

allowed to remain in a classroom after taping her talkative students mouths shut should make us all pause. The narrative of an amazing increase in test scores wherever she went is a common theme, but, as Ravitch details, so are serious questions about cheating, both in her own classroom, and in schools she led. As leader of the Washington D.C. schools, Rhee fired many teachers and principals. When she left, the problems she encountered were still there. Ravitch asks: were these problems caused by ineffective teachers? Again, she believes teachers get blamed for problems outside their control.

In Reign of Error, Ravitch details in a few chapters issues related to charter schools that would take an entire book to thoroughly explore. Ravitch begins here by explaining how the charter movement has in a sense hijacked the original idea behind such schools. The concept was developed by the late Albert Shanker, the head of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker's vision for charters was as laboratories for innovation that would try out new teaching/learning strategies to help underserved students. The idea was for successful programs to serve as models that could be implemented in other schools. Charter schools were not intended to replace existing public schools on a large scale, to bust unions, or to be key pieces in the investment portfolios of hedge funds. Ravitch briefly discusses Eva Moskowitz, the New York City charter school queen. She disparages her \$400,000 plus annual salary, but doesn't get into enough detail about how Moskowitz pits charter schools versus traditional public schools, or how her network of schools often takes over the buildings of those schools. Moskowitz forces thousands of her students onto busses to attend Albany rallies

pleading for even more money for her organization. This all happens on school days. Wouldn't these children benefit more from being in class with qualified, dedicated teachers, instead of spending hours on a bus traipsing across the countryside? Moscovitz claims she is dedicated to improving educational outcomes for students. Some of her actions make a mockery of her own supposed goals. Is it possible that it has more to do with Eva, and not the students? The fact that such "field trips" are allowed raises serious questions about oversight of charter schools, and even more questions about who is watching out for the taxpayer (who happens to be paying for these adventures).

Ravitch goes through a litany of issues with charter schools. She assails the manner in which they don't pay attention to the needs of students with disabilities, or ELL students. She criticizes how charters too often operate on a "no excuses" model of strict discipline and rote learning, with little room for the innovation charters were supposed to encourage. Ravitch cements her arguments against charter schools when she provides data which doesn't support the claims by charter supporters that they outperform other schools.

The last area Ravitch tackles in Reign of Error is the role of factors such as poverty and student health in student achievement. She provides solid suggestions here, ranging from providing students healthcare at schools, to making sure all students have access to high-quality afterschool and enrichment. She lauds Geoffrey Canada's network, Harlem Children's Zone for doing this well. Canada's network is one charter organization that I feel has actually done well for its students, and the larger community,

but comes with a very high price tag. Without taking away from genuine accomplishments, how can we implement their strategies on a larger scale? The network finances their schools, and the wraparound services that are a key component of its model with a mix of public money and private, often corporate, funding. My question is: Shouldn't the government be funding such schools for all students? Quick solution: raise the needed funding by increasing taxes on said corporations, and use the revenue for schools. If this suggestion were followed, these corporations wouldn't have to be funding schools.

I applaud Ravitch for admitting she may have been wrong with her past support of a lot of what she now refutes. She is one of a shockingly small number of those in the political and literary arenas who defends public schools, and the teachers who staff them. I give her credit for being a voice of reason in the education reform debate. Her efforts have filled what would otherwise be a tremendous void in the response to claims made by the education reformers. There are not many strong leaders defending America's teachers, not even some of their union leaders. The President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, has missed many opportunities when she could have tried to put a stop to some of the worst attacks against public education, often coming from not only privateers, but politicians as well. Speaking to the entire membership of the Clarkstown Teacher's Association in West Nyack, New York, in April 2011, Weingarten didn't help deflect what has been criticism of her lackluster advocacy for her dues paying members. She mostly defended then secretary Duncan, whom she referred to as "Arne." In response to her thoughts about what was

at that time a threatening new teacher evaluation process in New York, she stated “Well, at least you have something.” The question that had been posed to her was about the cockamamie practice of evaluating a teacher based on test results of students a teacher didn’t teach, in a subject they didn’t teach! The answer, just like the practice, struck me as complete and utter nonsense. These were not fears of self-absorbed teachers, these were scenarios that were actually happening, and in retrospect, quite disturbing. Similar to many leaders of the reform movement, money does matter to her, if not to her members. She takes home an annual dues funded salary of approximately \$500,000.

My hope, based on Ravitch’s examination of the issues in the school reform movement is that the issues she has raised and examined will serve as a foundation for improvement in American schools. Personally, I do not necessarily oppose charter schools, school choice, or even vouchers. I see many scenarios where they might provide students a superior education. It is in the motive of some of those who operate these programs where my suspicions arise. Excessive profiteering, kicking schools out of their buildings and similar actions do not inspire confidence as to some of these operator’s motives.

After reading Reign of Error, I was left wondering how opinions and ideas of those like Ravitch could be worked into a larger share of America’s schools. It’s as if we need her ideas transferred to a politician willing to fight for them. Just this week, leading national democrats announced the framework of a new populist approach. Maybe they

could include some of what Ravitch espouses into the platform. Who knows, if they follow her lead, they might even win elections again.