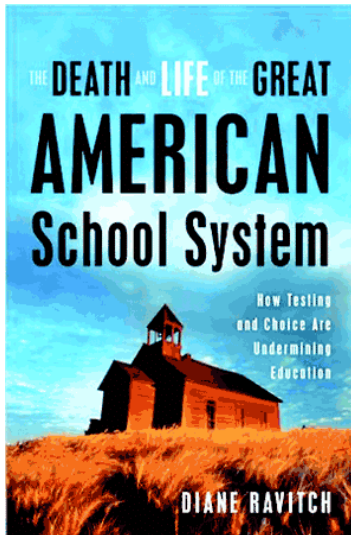


“THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEM”

by Diane Ravitch, Basic Books, 2010 242 pgs. \$26.95



In the literature of advocacy, the apostate makes a particularly compelling figure. Having crossed over from the opposite camp on an issue, it is assumed that she/he knows the arguments inside and out, sees flaws more clearly and has arrived at conclusions more objectively. Diane Ravitch is just such an apostate. The esteemed educational historian and policy analyst who once served as Undersecretary Of Education was once an advocate for charter schools and an array of reforms designed to improve education through testing, accountability, and choice etc. She now has come to the position that those reforms have not worked and are undermining what ought to be our supreme commitment; the goal of providing a first rate education for all Americans as a public goal through the reinvigoration of the public school system.

“I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. They promised to end bureaucracy, to ensure that poor children were not neglected, to empower poor parents, to enable poor children to escape failing schools, and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, black and white, But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw the more I lost faith.” Pg. 3-4

Educational policy has, over many decades, been an area for fierce intellectual and ideological battles that inevitably intersect with politics, culture, economics, and religion. In this outstanding work Diane Ravitch takes on the predominant trend in educational reform that has been gradually maturing for the past 20 years. This trend, originating as a conservative critique, is now supported by both major political parties and the establishment media. Like so many other conservative policy prescriptions, it looks to the private corporate world to provide the model for addressing public problems. This approach leads to steps towards privatization by encouraging charter schools over public schools and to managing schools like businesses with their reliance on data achieved through testing and purely statistical configurations to measure success. Teachers and the Teachers Union become an opposition force rather than partners in solving problems.

Ever the historian and scholar, Ravitch begins her critique by going back to 1983 and a report called “A Nation At Risk” issued by The National Commission On Excellence In Education. It’s opening said it all.

“the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people”. Pg. 24

Even though the commission was established under the Reagan administration, its actual analysis and recommendations bore no hint of the push for the kind of conservative agenda that was to follow.

Immediately after the report came out ideas began to emerge to meet the “crisis in education”. By 1988 the charter school movement had begun. Ironically it was American Federation Of Teachers President Albert Shankar who was one of the original proponents of Charter schools. His idea was that teachers could open smaller schools to experiment on problem areas. But as early as 1993 he turned and became a vociferous critic.

“As he watched the charter movement evolve, as he saw new businesses jump into the ‘education industry’ he realized that the idea he had so enthusiastically embraced was being taken over by corporations, entrepreneurs, and practitioners of ‘do your own thing’” **pg. 123**

Now, 17 years later, with Shankar’s warnings largely ignored, the issue can finally start to be evaluated with an accumulated body of empirical evidence. Presenting the findings of numerous studies and examining two experimental school districts in depth, Ravitch shows that as a panacea for the nation’s schools, charters have not worked. Yes, there are some excellent charter schools but there are also some terrible ones just as there are excellent and terrible public schools. After all the different factors between charter and public schools are taken into consideration, factors such as demographics, income level, parental participation, available funding resources, class size, programs for children with special needs, etc. it is not possible to conclude through empirical data that charters have solved a problem. As a RAND corporation study in the Philadelphia school system in 2008 cited, the gains made in charter schools were “indistinguishable” from those in traditional public schools.

Why then has there been such an across the board enthusiasm for charters? The answer can only be found in ideology. *“Charter schools represented more than anything else a concerted effort to deregulate public education with few restrictions on pedagogy, curriculum, class size, discipline, or other details of their operation.”* **Pg.133**

In subsequent chapters Ravitch goes on to methodically take apart the whole ensemble of ideas that constitute today’s education reform package. In that package the notion of “accountability” takes on supreme importance. After all, who could be against holding people accountable for what they do? But the concern becomes grossly distorted when it leads to a reliance on standardized multiple choice testing.

“The problem was the misuse of testing for high-stakes purposes, the belief that tests could identify with certainty which students should be held back, which teachers and principals should be fired or rewarded, and which schools should be closed...” **Pg. 150**

Ravitch details the many problems posed by this exaggerated use of tests which results in a de-emphasis on an actual quality curriculum, a neurotic preoccupation with scores, a gaming of the system by students and teachers, and the dangerous illusion that when high test scores have been achieved, learning has occurred. In fact this obsession only serves to undermine one of the fundamental goals of education itself; the development of a thinking human being capable of critically evaluating the world he/she will have to function in.

The data centered evaluation approach ties into another major component of conservative education reform and that is the targeting of teachers and the teachers union as being primarily responsible for poor classroom results. If a CEO in the corporate world is

dissatisfied with his/her managers there is always the option of firing them and replacing them. Applying this model to public education has created an enormous conflict with the Teachers Union who see tenure and the right to due process as one of their most important victories achieved over years of struggle.

Ravitch explores the issue in depth and challenges the notions that all it takes are “great teachers” to improve education, that one can statistically isolate the many other factors that determine scholastic results and that Union rules serve to protect mediocre teachers. She alludes to her favorite teacher in high school, Mrs. Ruby Ratliff as her model of a great English teacher. Mrs. Ratliff insisted that her students write frequent essays with attention to good grammar and syntax. They read the greatest writers the language has produced and she instilled in her students a love of literature that would last a lifetime. In an environment where what matters most in determining educational quality is not curriculum or instruction but data, where sophisticated analytical techniques elevate statisticians and economists who know little about real education to judge what is effective and what is not, the precious gifts of a Mrs. Ratliff are lost.

Ravitch concludes that the national discussion must focus on curriculum which begins with the fundamental question of why we educate our children. Is it simply to prepare them mechanistically for a slot in the business world. We must ask ourselves what kind of human beings we want to be and want our children to be. The tragic loss today is that, beginning with No Child Left Behind, our curriculum is being so drastically sacrificed and impoverished in the name of market style reforms.

“It is unlikely that the United States would have emerged as a world leader had it left the development of education to the whim and will of the free market. The market is not the right mechanism to supply police protection or fire protection, nor is it the right mechanism to supply public education.” Pg. 241

With the Obama administration, along with a number of well funded private foundations (The Gates Foundation, The Annenberg Foundation etc.) sadly promoting the corporate business model for education policy, the effort to challenge that model is rendered that much more difficult. But armed with this excellent, well researched, and comprehensive study of the issue by one of the nation’s leading thinkers on the subject, those who care about our future have a powerful tool with which to prove that maybe mountains can indeed be moved.

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