

## Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools

By Diane Ravitch

Published 2013, Alfred Knopf  
New York

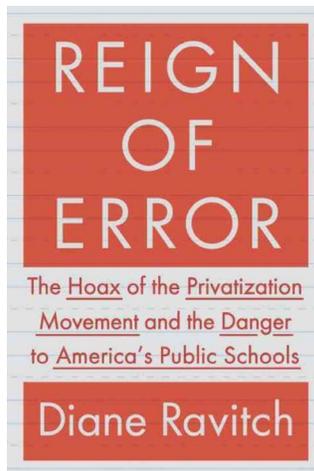
Diane Ravitch - currently a Research Professor of Education at New York University - is a familiar name to most educators; the former Assistant Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board by President Bill Clinton, and most particularly, the chief architect of the "No Child Left Behind" (or NCLB) education law. At a recent conference at Dartmouth College, in response to a question from the audience asking her to explain her dramatic turn around, Ravitch responded:

*"I believed in those things [NCLB and the Race to the Top] because they didn't yet exist and sounded good in theory. Now they have [been tried]. I reviewed the evidence. I realized I was wrong and wrote a book about it. I decided the rest of my life would be committed to reversing course and correcting what I got wrong."*

***Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*** is that book, and a must read for anyone interested in the future of our public schools. Ravitch begins with a heart-wrenching opening chapter – "Our Schools Are at Risk" – which serves as an overview of her perspective, namely that public schools are not failing

drastically, are not broken, and are not in deep crisis (not to say there aren't areas of improvement needed, particularly in some urban areas). Furthermore, Ravitch states - the solution to this supposed public school disaster is not to continue to use even more standardized tests, not to fire teachers and principals, not to close schools, not to allow uncertified people to teach, not to eliminate teachers' unions, nor to use public funds to hire for-profit corporations to use vouchers to run charter schools and online/virtual schools - possibly spelling the death of public education. Thus, she closes that opening chapter as follows:

*"If we mean to conquer educational inequity, we must recognize that the root causes of poor academic performance are segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools. We must act decisively to reduce the causes of inequity. We know what good schools look like, we know what great education consists of. We must bring good schools to every district and neighborhood in our nation. Public education is a basic public responsibility: we must not be persuaded by a false crisis narrative to privatize it. It is time for parents, educators, and other concerned citizens to join together to*



*strengthen our public schools and preserve them for future generations. **The future of our democracy depends on it.*** [emphasis mine]

Diane Ravitch then provides an in-depth analysis of what she calls the “corporate reformers” before launching into a detailed, thoroughly researched refutation of the false criticisms, the false attacks on public education in our country. There are 15 tightly argued chapters - accompanied by an Appendix of 41 charts and graphs - with such headings as: “The Facts About Test Scores,” “The Facts About the Achievement Gap,” “The Facts About the International Test Scores,” “The Facts About High School Graduation Rates,” and more. For each of these chapters, Ravitch begins with what she calls the “Claim” and the “Reality.” For example, she begins the chapter entitled “The Facts About Teachers and Test Scores” as follows:

*“CLAIM Teachers determine student test scores, and test scores may be used to identify and reward effective teachers and to fire those who are not effective.*

*REALITY Test scores are not the best way to identify the best teachers.”*

Her in-depth analysis then includes the finding that this idea comes, at least in large part, from one major



**Diane Ravitch.**  
Photo © Paul Wolfe, Courtesy Alfred E Knopf/Random House Books

source, that of statistician William Sanders who used his statistical model in advising agricultural and manufacturing industries. According to Sanders, by monitoring student progress on the test scores of a given teacher from year to year, he could isolate the “value added” by the teacher to that child’s learning. Ravitch then goes on to cite the joint statement prepared by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Academy of Education (NAE) noting the problems with this value-added assessment model which doesn’t take into account such additional factors as:

- school factors such as class sizes, curriculum materials, instructional time, availability of specialists and tutors, and resources for learning (books, computers, science labs, and more)
- home and community supports or challenges
- individual student needs and abilities, health, and attendance
- peer culture and achievement
- prior teachers and schooling, as well as other current teachers
- differential summer learning loss, which especially affects low-income children
- the specific tests used, which emphasize some kinds of learning and not other, and which rarely measure achievement that is well above or below grade level

She then concludes this chapter with this statement - “Aside from the absence of evidence for this way of evaluating teachers, there remains the essential question of why scores on standardized tests should displace every other goal and expectation for schools: character, knowledge, citizenship, love of learning, creativity, initiative, and social skills.”

Diane Ravitch then devotes the final 11 chapters of *Reign of Error* to solutions to the above “errors,” each describing a recommendation. In a short introductory chapter to these possible solutions, Ravitch first reminds us that principals and teachers in schools cannot alone solve what are critical factors deeply embedded in our current society:

*“The current reform approach **DOES NOT** alter the status quo of deep poverty and entrenched inequality. After more than a decade of No Child Left Behind*

[I'm reminded that 2014 is supposed to be the year when all students would be proficient in reading and math!], *we now know that a program of testing and accountability leaves millions of children behind and DOES NOT eliminate poverty or close achievement gaps. The growing demand for more testing and more accountability in the wake of NCLB is akin to bringing a blowtorch to put out a fire.*" [emphasis mine]

Ravitch then refers to the work of Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond who points out that it's not as tough as we don't know what works. From the 1960s into the 1980s there were the highly successful educational policies of the "War on Poverty" and the "Great Society" in which - "the black-white reading gap shrank by two-thirds for 17-year-olds, black high school and college graduation rates more than doubled, and, in 1975, rates of college attendance among whites, blacks and Latinos reached parity for the first and only time before or ever since." Using her format, here are her 11 solutions with research evidence to support each one:

*SOLUTION NO. 1 Provide good prenatal care for every pregnant woman.*

*SOLUTION NO. 2 Make high-quality early childhood education available to all children.*

*SOLUTION NO. 3 Every school should have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education.*

*SOLUTION NO. 4 Reduce class sizes to improve student achievement and behavior.*

*SOLUTION NO. 5 Ban for-profit charters and charter chains and ensure that charter schools collaborate with public schools to support better education for all children.*

*SOLUTION NO. 6 Provide the medical and social services that poor children need to keep up with their advantaged peers.*

*SOLUTION NO. 7 Eliminate high-stakes standardized testing and rely instead on assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do.*

*SOLUTION NO. 8 Insist that teachers, principals, and superintendents be professional educators.*

*SOLUTION NO. 9 Public schools should be controlled by elected school boards or by boards in large cities ap-*

*pointed for a set term by more than one elected official.*

*SOLUTION NO. 10 Devise actionable strategies and specific goals to reduce racial segregation and poverty.*

*SOLUTION NO. 11 Recognize that public education is a public responsibility, not a consumer good.*

It is particularly important to note that three of these solutions do not involve teachers or schools – No. 1, No. 6, and No. 10 – and yet are crucial in addressing the current situation for all too many students.

Building on these 11 chapters is the last chapter - with a thoughtful analogy in the title, "Conclusions: the Pattern on the Rug" - in which Diane Ravitch first reminds us all:

***"Public education is an essential part of the democratic fabric of American society. Nearly 90 percent of American students attend public schools, whose doors are open to all, without regard to race, ethnicity, language, gender, disability status, national origin, or economic class. Control of public education is democratic, subject to decisions made by elected or appointed officials, rather than by private boards or for-profit corporations. Community schools are controlled by residents of the community, not by corporate chains. In 95 percent of the school districts in the United States, if the public does not like the decisions of their school boards, they can vote them out of office. The goal of our public educational system, evolved over many decades, is equality of opportunity."*** [emphasis mine]

And Ravitch ends *Reign of Error* noting in particular: ***"Protecting our public schools against privatization and saving them for future generations of American children is the civil rights issue of our time."*** [again, emphasis mine] Thank you Diane!

