

Book Review: The Death and Life of the Great American School System

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Consider a nation where 100 percent of its third and eighth grade students are proficient in the basic skills of mathematics and reading. No matter their socio-economic status, motivation, parental involvement or school resources. All students in this nation will be able to compete with the rest of the world in the marketplace as well as academics. The achievement gap between students of means, students in poverty, white students and students of color is non-existent. All teachers are effective because they have been evaluated by corporate mandated standards. The reason for this high achievement is due to the fact that a corporate style management is administered not by educators, but by business professionals. Welcome to the utopian nation of the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB)

NCLB heralded a market based reform approach for the American school system. Choice, competition and accountability were presented as a panacea to the nation's achievement gap and lagging performance of American students compared to countries such as Japan and Germany. Taking on public-school reform by using the corporate business model was the driving force of NCLB. If a school was underperforming, a businesslike fix would be applied to reap maximum results. In the corporate world if a business was failing, the management and workforce would be replaced or another business would pick up the customer base who wanted a better choice or product. It made sense at the time to many in the business of education and politics—and it made sense to an early proponent of NCLB, Diane Ravitch, research Professor of Education at New York University and a Historian of education.

Diane Ravitch's book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* takes an unsparing look at The "No Child Left Behind Act" and its proponents. NCLB was passed during George W. Bush's administration with bipartisan support in both houses of congress in 2001 ("U.S. Department of Education"). President George W. Bush worked closely with the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy to craft the school reform legislation. The goal of NCLB was to bring all K-12 students to proficiency in reading and mathematics. The implementation of standardized tests for third and eighth graders would determine if the students were making sufficient academic progress to meet this goal of proficiency. If a

school had substandard test scores corrective action would be taken; teachers and principals would be fired, schools would be closed and any other number of corrective actions deemed necessary by the government at the Federal, State and local level would be taken.

Diane Ravitch was an early supporter of NCLB. A former Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, an appointee to the National Assessment Governing Board by President William Jefferson Clinton and the author or editor of more than twenty books as well as many articles on the subject of American education (Ravitch) she has a unique perspective on the issue of NCLB. In her book she discusses her early support of NCLB: "I supported bold attempts to remake the schools, such as charter schools, privatization, and specialized schools of all kinds (9).

It wasn't long before Ravitch realized that the market reform approach to schooling America's students was misguided in that the punitive and capricious nature of NCLB was doing more harm than good. In the chapter "Lessons from San Diego," Ravitch outlines the struggle between the San Diego teachers union and the market based reforms brought on by Alan Bersin, a non-educator who was hired as superintendent of the San Diego school system. Bersin, a former federal prosecutor along with Anthony Alvarado, a former district superintendent from New York City "launched a radical venture in school reform. (47). Their heavy handed tactics of publicly firing administrators and educators in a humiliating manner—being given no notice and being led out of their offices by security personnel for example—set the tone for a toxic battle that did little to enhance student performance. Bersin serves as just one example in Ravitch's book of non-educators charging bull-like into school district after school district, upending the status quo of public education more often than not to less than positive results.

Under NCLB student performance was only measured by standardized tests in reading and mathematics. The instruction of music, art, social studies and civics largely fell by the wayside under NCLB. The Holy Grail under NCLB was positive test scores. Ravitch maintains that educators focusing solely on test results have yielded a nation of students who can give a memorized answer to multiple choice

questions but could not explain any theory or practice behind these answers. The lack of priority on the liberal arts, civics, music and so on is cited by Ravitch as being a terrible consequence of NCLB. "Without the effort to teach our common cultural heritage, we risk losing it and being left with nothing in common but an evanescent and often degraded popular culture." (233)

Ravitch makes the case in the chapter titled "The Billionaire Boys Club" that the unfettered special interests of a few charitable foundations, including; The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Walton Foundation have an undue influence in the political arena and by extension the American educational system. She cites examples of billions of dollars wasted on school reforms that did not work, and in some cases had disastrous consequences. For example, the Gates Foundation had a process where smaller schools were created within larger schools, with each floor of the school being designated for a different discipline and different sets of students. Unfortunately this created "loser" floors, "geek" floors, "stoner" floors where the problem of school segregation flourished rather than dissipated—which was not the intent of NCLB. Ravitch argues that none of the market based reforms under NCLB—no matter how well intentioned, were given enough time to develop or were not vetted before being implemented, giving negative consequences for the students, staff and faculty. Furthermore, the free market ideology of the Walton family (heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune) had a misguided idea that students and parents must be treated as customers who deserved choice and competition when it comes to education. (203) Ravitch maintains that students are not customers, and that public education is a societal institution that serves the public good, and should not be subject to the prejudices of a select few moneyed interests with their own myopic view of what constitutes a sound education for America's K-12 students.

The book itself is not an easy read. Loaded with citations and statistics—and the redundant use of such throughout the book—make for a real slog at times. But for those with a little skin in the game; parents, students and educators, it is worth the time. Many issues explored are no doubt rage-making to some. Take the issue of charter schools; a study of the Oakland, California school district in 2009 revealed that "twenty-two of the districts' thirty-two charter schools posted higher

scores than the similar district schools” (215). Unfortunately this study—like many other favorable studies of charter schools across the country do not take into account the selective enrollment of these schools. Certain barriers are put in place to discourage lower performing students to enroll, such as lotteries. The students who are more likely to apply for these lotteries are more often than not from a motivated family with adequate resources who will work with the school to ensure their child’s success. The kids who are not so lucky end up in the public schools where their chance of success is diminished further by the draining of resources to the charter schools.

In the chapter titled: “What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?’ Ravitch tells of the most inspiring teacher that she ever had. Mrs. Ratliff was a high school teacher in Ravitch’s hometown of Houston, Texas. Mrs. Ratliff was a stern task master who tolerated no nonsense or lackadaisical behavior from her students. Despite her tough reputation, “students lined up every semester” to register for a spot in Mrs. Ratliff’s classes. (169). She was a brilliant educator who instilled in her students a sense of enlightenment through the study of the great masters of literature and poetry. No handholding, no coddling, just pure study of pure material. Not State mandated drills and multiple choice tests for Mrs. Ratliff, she had minds to educate. Ravitch readily admits that the Mrs. Ratliff of her high school days would never survive the limitations, humiliations and injustices of NCLB. In the final chapter titled: “Lessons Learned” Ravitch takes a straight arrow aim at Bill Gates. She asks the question of the billionaire philanthropist and ardent school reformer how the teachers who inspired him as a child could ever meet the strict criteria of NCLB? That question, I fear shall go unanswered until the next big bright thing in education steam rolls over a new generation of American students.