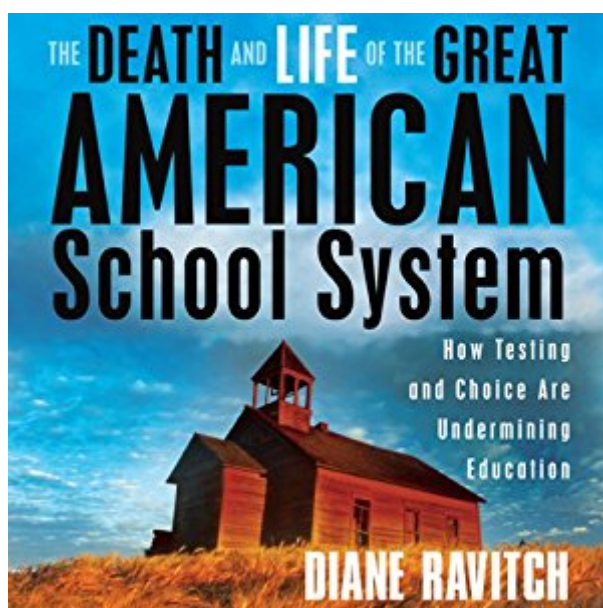


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The Death And Life Of The Great American School System: How Testing And Choice Are Undermining Education



Synopsis

In this best-selling expose of national policy gone wrong, America's foremost historian of education, Diane Ravitch, renounces her support for reform policies implemented over the past decade that she says are wrecking America's cherished tradition of public education. Strategies like accountability schemes based on questionable standardized tests, merit pay for teachers based on gains on the same unreliable tests, vouchers, and charter schools have been oversold as solutions for our educational problems. Policymakers pushing a market model of reform and charter schools are on the wrong track, ignoring classroom realities. The more they push these policies, Ravitch says, the more they will harm our nation's school system and undermine the quality of education. The bipartisan No Child Left Behind program ("NCLB") implemented with a heavy political hand nationwide, has failed to improve education. It has turned our schools into testing factories to train children how to take standardized tests instead of giving them the knowledge and skills that are necessary components of a good education. The federal "sanctions" and "remedies" now mandated nationwide have unfairly stigmatized thousands of schools, putting them at risk of being closed and privatized. The "miracles" touted by districts under the new policies vanish on close examination. Test scores in many states and districts are inflated by statistical game-playing and lowered standards. The over-emphasis on testing has all but eliminated the essential elements of a solid education, including history, civics, science, the arts, geography, literature, physical education, health education, and foreign languages. Privatization and deregulation has led predictably to some good and some bad but, on average, charters do not get better results than regular public schools—just new federal subsidies. Teacher evaluation by student test scores is a deeply flawed approach to hiring and job tenure that is driving good teachers out of public education. The future of public education is at stake. A democratic society needs a healthy, vibrant public education system with good public schools in every neighborhood. On our current course, the schools will be privatized, deregulated, and turned over to entrepreneurs. Based on a careful review of the evidence, Ravitch says that this course of action is unlikely to improve American education.

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Customer Reviews

The journeys the intellectually curious take are often interesting, and Diane Ravitch's evolution as a thinker and writer in education is fascinating to follow. This reviewer can't help but wonder how Ms. Ravitch's journey matches his own. A decade ago I was a graduate student. I had earned my undergraduate degree in music education, and had been teaching for several years, and was uninterested in getting another "ed degree." I opted instead to get a Masters Degree in liberal studies, focusing purely on academics uncluttered with education methods courses. While there I was exposed to works by Ayn Rand, Tom Sowell, and a host of other free-market thinkers, and I found myself largely convinced by their arguments. As graduation approached I wrote my thesis on free-market reforms in public education, taking the radical stance that public education was a failed experiment that should be abandoned. Instead, I argued, it would be far more efficient to let private and parochial schools compete for students whose parents were free to enroll their child in any school they could afford. The tax savings could go to provide an education for those who could not afford it. I spent 100s of pages defending this proposition using whatever statistics I could muster to bolster my case. I read and quoted all the free-market education luminaries: Chubb and Moe, Sowell, and yes, Diane Ravitch. This work altered my life. I quit my public school job and took a teaching job in a parochial high school. I loved that job, and it confirmed for me that private schools (especially religious ones) tended to work better because of a more humane environment, higher curriculum standards, and greater freedom for teachers to both teach and discipline without political interference. However, I noticed something else. The teachers I was working with at the private high school were exactly the same folks who I taught with in the public high school. They weren't any smarter, or better read, or more educated. They were freer to teach, that was certain. But that was due more than anything else to a relatively permissive administration that wasn't constantly on people's backs trying to "improve performance." I also noticed that students who did drugs, or got into fights, or just struggled academically disappeared from the school over time. Some were

expelled, some just removed themselves when they discovered they couldn't handle the work or didn't like having to wear a uniform, or didn't like the fact they had to deal with a dean of discipline. It was self-evident that this state of affairs made teaching MUCH easier. After several years teaching at the private high school my family started to grow and my wife informed me that she wanted to stay home with the children. After years teaching in the private school, fiscal realities began to set in. I needed to make more money. So I updated my portfolio, and went to work again in the public schools. After having taught in both settings for so long, and mixing academic head-work with real world experience in the trenches, I can honestly say that I have drawn many of the same conclusions Diane Ravitch does in this book. The reasons the private schools outperform the public ones are myriad, but have NOTHING TO DO with school choice, economics, tenure reform, unions, and testing. Perversely, these reforms make our public schools less like the private schools that outperform them. In fact, these things have virtually no positive impact at all as far as I can tell. What does work? Standards and curriculum that aren't driven by tests, teachers who are free to teach the curriculum and hold students to account for the material, and administrations who ensure the curriculum is being taught. Here is a truly frightening true story: A local superintendent was having a frank conversation with a teacher regarding budget cuts. She said "look, you teach music. There are people who teach social studies. Are these subjects on state tests? Do they matter? As far as I am concerned social studies teachers basically waste faculty parking spaces in the lot." You read that right. In an age when more than a third of Americans cannot pass the basic citizenship test required of those seeking U.S. citizenship, this superintendent called history and social teachers a waste of faculty parking spaces. Want to know the reasons why social studies supposedly "doesn't matter" anymore? Read this book. It begins with a good explanation. Do you think that the schools are the reason Americans are uninformed. Think again. As a colleague once told me when I shared with them a libertarian critique of the public schools before I left to go teach in the private school: "No. Its society stupid." In addition to strong and intact traditional families we need standards: NATIONAL STANDARDS that have meat to them in all disciplines. We need to be free to teach that curriculum. We need to work to end grade inflation. We need administrators who support teachers who teach curriculum and hold students to account. We need parents need to work WITH as opposed to AGAINST teachers in the schools. These are the things that will improve education. What WON'T work is the current ideologically driven war on teachers being waged by well-meaning but misguided and out of touch folks on the "right." Diane Ravitch has written a compelling book. However, I fear it is too little too late. Our public schools (and the teaching profession) may die the same death other jobs have died in the course 30 years of ideologically driven national suicide. I was convinced

intellectually by arguments of free-traders and libertarians. However, the real world is what matters. So called free-markets and international free-trade have become the mechanisms by which our middle class is being destroyed, our jobs outsourced, our wages reduced, our job security ended, and our families put under financial strain that they cannot survive. It may be too late to stand up and yell "stop the madness." But stand up we must.

To start this review off in a moderately inflammatory way, I'll mention that I first heard of Diane Ravitch's new book when the head of the teacher's union in my school district recommended that the school board (which I'm on) read it. Our school district, which considers itself innovative, has seized upon many of the in vogue ideas that claim to promote student success and achievement: small school initiatives, charter schools, proficiency based learning, data driven teaching, amongst others. Here in Oregon, we are facing the dual specters of the worst financial crisis in the last seventy years, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law grinding its inexorable way towards the consequences of setting laudable, but unachievable goals. A bit of my background that may help frame my comments: I'm a family physician that raised four children (all now adults) with my wife. My wife has been a teacher since 1974, teaching (and loving) middle school for the last 15 years. I come from a conservative background, moderately paranoid of the intentions of unions, pro-innovation, and thoroughly frustrated with the expense and mediocrity of public education. I'm not someone to just complain and criticize from a distance, though: I've been a hard-working school board member for over six years. I've learned a lot. Diane Ravitch's book taught me a whole lot more, much of which I didn't want to know. I'm the better for it. Ravitch doesn't unleash a focused salvo in her book, instead marshalling a more broad-based reexamination of some enormously popular (with politicians, the public, and business interests) concepts in public education. They also happened to be concepts very popular with me: teacher pay linked to performance, charter schools, consequences for schools, teachers, principals if they don't meet performance goals, data driven education based on test scores. Ravitch is neither a reactionary, nor a radical. Though she has worked at a variety of highly influential jobs in education, her specialty is the history of education. All of us know what those who don't know history are doomed to do, and it behooves even skeptics (not just skeptical school board members) to turn an attentive ear to what is carefully laid out in *The Death and Life of the Great American Education System*. It would be wrong, in this review, to take sides on the issues that Ravitch addresses. It isn't that I don't have opinions (my fellow school board members would howl at that notion), but that voicing them would detract from what I'd like others to know about this book. What I would like to hook a potential reader of this book with is this notion:

whether you are an ardent supporter or a bitter opponent of charter schools, pay for performance, NCLB, rigid focus on the basics (reading, writing, math), you will turn the last past page of this book with a far more informed and thoughtful perspective than you had when you turned the first page. And turn those pages you will, because if a non-fiction book about education can possibly be a page turner, this is the best candidate yet for that designation. It is not an overstatement to say that some of the history that Ravitch recounts about the upheavals in education that have occurred in New York, San Diego, Washington D.C., as well as the results of several billion dollars in grants by organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is gripping, even a bit mind-bending. Ravitch's careful walk through what the press SAID was happening during these upheavals, versus the actual cold hard facts that emerged when all the dust from the tornadoes of hype and opinion surrounding them settled to the ground, is instructive to all conservatives and liberals that lay claim to having an open mind. My wife, the middle school teacher, says that one of her goals with every student is to make them into a lifelong learner. All of us that are interested in public education should aspire to that same goal for ourselves. Ravitch's approach to what she perceives as ailing in education is a finely crafted and highly personal one, personal enough that few readers are likely to find themselves in complete agreement with her. What almost every reader will acknowledge, though, by the end of the book is that their perspective has been broadened, and their understanding of the issues has been deepened. It is not too often that a book forms a bridge between a school board member and the head of the teacher's union, but this one is capable of doing so (and did).

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