

Research Brief

**A Time of Peril
for Public Education**

Diane Ravitch
New York University

I have been writing about American education since the late 1960s, mainly from the perspective of a historian of education. Briefly, in the early 1990s I was assistant secretary of education in charge of the Office of Education Research and Improvement, where I campaigned to promote voluntary national standards.

For the next decade, I joined the growing chorus of those who advocated for choice, merit pay, testing, and accountability. A few years ago, I began to mute my advocacy for these ideas. As I watched what was happening in American education, specifically, in response to No Child Left Behind, I began to re-evaluate what I had been writing and saying. And I concluded that I was wrong, that these ideas are wrong, and that these ideas are leading American education in the wrong direction.

Now, to my dismay, I see this agenda — which was once the Republican agenda for education reform — embraced fully by President Obama and Secretary Duncan. Now this agenda is the main-stream agenda that is being promoted by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Race to the Top Fund. So nearly \$5 billion will be invested in what I have elsewhere called George W. Bush's third term in education.

As my penance, I have written a book in which I acknowledge that I was wrong. In my book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, I review the evidence for these reforms and conclude that we are on a path to miseducating a generation of American children. Worse, we are on a path to privatizing large swaths of American public education, especially in our urban districts, where we are relinquishing our nation's most vulnerable children to private enterprise and non-educators.

I am not opposed to testing. If used for informational and diagnostic purposes, I believe tests can be extremely useful to students, parents, and teachers. But tests should not be used to punish teachers and principals and to close schools because tests are instruments that are subject to random error. The public and politicians think that tests are comparable to barometers or yard sticks and that they simply tell the truth. In my research into accountability, I find that the tests do not match the expectations attached to them and that schools, districts, and even states are manipulating accountability systems, all to meet NCLB's unrealistic, utopian goals.

In my chapter on NCLB, I show that its command that all children must be proficient by 2014 is absurd. No district, no state, no nation has ever reached that goal. The only way we will reach it is by dumbing down standards and pretending that students are “proficient” when they are not.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration has adopted the same policies as the Bush administration. It wants to go even farther than the Bush administration by closing some 5,000 low-performing schools, based on the punitive accountability that the Bush administration and NCLB fostered. Yet we know that there is scant evidence that anyone knows how to turn around low-performing schools other than by throwing out the kids and bringing in higher-performing ones.

I look critically at the evidence on choice, especially vouchers and charters. The best evidence I have seen is that charters are extremely variable, ranging from excellent to abysmal, but on the whole they do not produce better results than regular public schools. A few outlier studies — like Hoxby’s in New York City — conclude that the charter sector is akin to a silver bullet. But most studies do not reach such a conclusion. Hoxby’s study was not peer reviewed, and we must await those reviews before accepting its conclusions.

The Obama administration’s push to increase the number of charter schools, I predict, will cripple public education in big cities. It will lead to the exodus of the most motivated children and families from public schools to privately managed ones. The public schools will be left with the children who are hardest to educate.

The Obama administration’s effort to get states to evaluate teachers in relation to their students’ test scores is ill-advised. The studies on which this proposal are based were prepared by economists and statisticians. While it has become popular to argue that we can identify the most effective teachers by their students’ scores, there is a solid body of research that says this is not true. Teachers who are supposedly in the top quintile may be in the middle quintile the next year. And teachers who are in the lowest quintile one year may be in a higher quintile the next.

Furthermore the theory popularized by Gordon, Kane, and Staiger, that the achievement gap can be closed by having effective teachers for five consecutive years in a row, is a theory and only a theory. It has never been demonstrated anywhere, in any school or any district. It is a theory based on econometric projections and extrapolations from data. The reason it has not been demonstrated anywhere is because, as I suggest, teacher quality is not written in concrete; also, one-year gains by students fade and cannot be multiplied by five, as Gordon, Kane, and Staiger believe (R. Gordon, T. J. Kane, and D. O. Staiger, “Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job,” Discussion Paper 2006–01, Brookings Institution).

Since Robert Gordon is now Deputy Director of OMB for the Obama administration and Thomas Kane is advising the Gates Foundation we have not heard the end of these assertions. The real effect of these policies as descriptors of teacher effectiveness will be to narrow the curriculum even more than it has been narrowed and to compel teachers to focus only on the subjects that are tested.

Based on my research, I predict that we will end up with a terrible paradox: higher tests scores and worse education. This is not what other nations do. This is not what most nations with the best-performing school systems do. Nations like Finland and Japan not only treat their teachers with respect, they have a curriculum that prominently includes the arts, history, literature, geography, civics, foreign languages, the sciences, and other studies. They do this not because the subjects are tested, but because it is the right thing to do. They do this because this is the way to ensure good education.

We are headed for a precipice. It is time to change direction.

About Diane Ravitch

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. From 1996–2005, Diane held the Brown Chair in Education Policy at Brookings and edited Brookings Papers on Education Policy. As Assistant Secretary of Education from 1991–1993, Diane was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education.

In 1997, President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the federal testing program. She was reappointed to that position in 2000 by Secretary of Education Richard Riley and served until 2004. Before entering government service, Diane was Adjunct Professor of History and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, will be published by Basic Books in March 2010. Her previous books include *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Schools* (1974), *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (1983), *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (2000), *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (2003), and *Edspeak: A Glossary of Education Terms, Phrases, Buzzwords, and Jargon* (2007). In 1990 Diane published *The American Reader*, an anthology of great American speeches, essays, poems, and songs; in 2006 she and her son, Michael, published *The English Reader: What Every Literate Person Needs to Know*, an anthology of classic English literature.

Diane has written nearly 500 articles and reviews for scholarly and popular publications. Her books and articles have been translated into many languages, including Chinese, Polish, Arabic, Spanish, Swedish, and Japanese. She blogs regularly at Education Week online with Deborah Meier and also on Huffington Post and Politico.com. In 2005 Diane received the John Dewey award from the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and the Uncommon Book Award from the Hoover Institution.

Diane has been elected to membership in the National Academy of Education, the Society of American Historians, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and PEN International. She is currently on the National Advisory Council of the National History Center. She previously served as a member of the board of the New York Public Library and the New York State Council on the Humanities. She has received honorary degrees from Williams College, Reed College, Amherst College, the State University of New York, Ramapo College, St. Joseph's College of New York, Middlebury College Language Schools, and Union College.

A native of Houston, Diane is a graduate of Houston's public schools. She received a B.A. from Wellesley College in 1960 and a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1975.

About the Visiting Scholars Series

NEA Research hosts the Visiting Scholars Series as a forum intended to help link policy initiatives with educational scholarship. Prominent scholars are asked to link their research to recommendations for closing achievement gaps. All Research Briefs are available on *InsideNEA* at <http://insidenea.nea.org/NEABiz/ResearchInfo/Pages/VisitingScholars.aspx>. For more information about the Visiting Scholars Series, contact:

Judith McQuaide
NEA Research, ext. 7375
jmcquaide@nea.org

Gwen Williams
NEA Research, ext. 7368
gwilliams@nea.org
