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Changing the Poisonous Narrative

A Conversation with Diane Ravitch

Arnold Dodge



Noted education historian Diane Ravitch talks with educator Arnold Dodge about what's wrong with the testing obsession and the corporate reform movement.

Dodge: I have had the privilege of attending four of your lectures during the last year. How have different audiences responded to your message about the movements you believe are currently undermining education?

Ravitch: I have spoken over the last year or two to more than 100 audiences about the fact that what I call the "Corporate Reform Movement" is taking us in the wrong direction. I can think of no audience that I have addressed, whether superintendents or school boards, administrators, parent groups, or teachers, where people have said, "We don't agree with you." People overwhelmingly have said, "Why aren't more people saying these obvious truths?" They are unbelievably grateful to hear that they are not crazy and that what's happening in education today is actually a tragedy.

I have to state, though, that I am aware of the many arrows, daggers, and spears thrown at me daily on the blogosphere and in the media. The tremendous support of teachers is my armor.

Dodge: Horace Mann predicted 150 years ago that should hostile partisans fight for control of the public schools, we would find ourselves unable to rely on reports and statistics about education. Is that where we find ourselves today—goaded on by partisan politics as we make decisions for our public schools?

Ravitch: Horace Mann was incredibly prescient in predicting what might happen if the schools got into politics. Today you see a lot of governors enacting draconian laws that will damage public education and dismantle the teaching profession. You see it in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. And then you see President Obama and Secretary Duncan pushing charter schools and the evaluation of teachers by test scores. In so many cases, political figures are shaping education policy and not trusting professionals to make professional judgments.

Dodge: Walt Gardner, who blogs for Education Week,¹ asserts that for those who are looking for a return to the golden age of education—well, there never really was one. He finds a trail of criticism of the public schools going back 170 years. The current critics talk about how poorly we rank on test score comparisons. But the World Economic Forum and the Institute for Management Development still rank the United States number one in overall competitiveness. Gardner notes that this is a curious honor for a country with ostensibly subpar schools. So, is the basic trigger of the current reform movement—namely that our schools are failing—a crafted myth?

Ravitch: Absolutely. For 60 years now, we have had this cascading criticism of the schools. As President Obama said in his state of the union address last January, we shouldn't listen to the naysayers. We have the most productive workers in the world, the most inventors, the most patents, the most successful companies, the greatest universities that everybody in the world wants to come to. International test scores are not a very good predictor of future success or failure as an economy. The things that have made the difference for our country are freedom and the encouragement of creativity, imagination, and innovation—things that are not encouraged by our obsession with standardized testing.

Dodge: *Forty years ago, when I was a beginning English teacher, I read the writings of Herb Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, David Elkind, and Lawrence Cremin. Their voices ring in my ears today. Do you think that 40 years from now those who began teaching today will hear the voices of Michelle Rhee, Arne Duncan, Michael Bloomberg, and Joel Klein?*

Ravitch: If you create a bookshelf of the education writings of Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, Michael Bloomberg, and Arne Duncan, it would be a very tiny shelf indeed. I am willing to bet that 10 years from now (or maybe 20 years from now), we will look back and say, What was that all about? Why were we willing to have the whole education enterprise directed toward an obsession with standardized test scores when we knew that the tests aren't that accurate? We made a fetish of testing. What we are missing right now are the voices that say so.

I try to encourage people who study child development to speak up, to say, this is wrong, children develop in different ways and at different paces and respond differently to different experiences. Standardized tests can't be the measure of all things that have to do with children.

The narrative that is so powerful right now in the United States is supported and promoted by corporate heads. I don't have a conspiracy view of the world, but it gives me pause to know that Viacom owns NBC, and Viacom owns *Waiting for Superman*, and NBC promotes *Waiting for Superman*, and they get \$2 million from Bill Gates to promote the movie. You begin to feel that an overwhelming amount of money is going toward ends that are misdirected.

Dodge: *If we believe that the testing mania is not appropriate, how do we go about changing its importance?*

Ravitch: If there is one way to knock the pins out from under this corporate reform movement, it would be to demystify standardized testing as an objective measure. Standardized testing is not a thermometer and not a barometer. Psychometricians will tell you about the margin of error in standardized tests. When I was appointed by the Clinton administration to the National Assessment Governing Board, a body that oversees national testing, I would review test questions. Time and again I would find a question with two right answers but one "best" answer. A kid who thinks a little bit differently might say that answer one is just as good as answer two, and he would be right, but he is going to be penalized.

Often the graders take a cursory look at the tests, especially the constructed-response questions, and place a grade on them. So you have bad questions, bad scoring—even the computers make errors in scoring. We have had example after example in which the testing companies had to go back and say 8,000 of the tests had an error. Yet we use testing in ways not used anywhere else in the world. The top-performing nations do not test every child every year.

Testing is a very flawed instrument, and we are basing our kids' futures on it. We have to think about what testing does to children over a 12-year period. Taking these tests year after year teaches them that the aim of education is to be able to get the right answer and that you will be given four choices, three of which are wrong and one of which is right. What does that do to the child's thinking? What does that do to creativity, to imagination, to the ability to take a problem and turn it around and see something that no one else can see?

Dodge: *Since we are in New York, could you comment on the new professional performance review?*

Ravitch: The New York Board of Regents recently voted to say that up to 40 percent of a [public school] teacher's evaluation would be based on test scores: 20 percent from the state test and 20 percent from a local test. And if a district doesn't have a local test, 40 percent of the rating can be based on the state tests. I am totally opposed to this. Test results should count for zero percent of an evaluation.

Using test results to evaluate teachers will incentivize teachers to teach to what we know are bad tests. Just last year, all the test scores had to be recalibrated because the state had allowed the tests to become

easier over time and the scores were inflated. (By the way, the New York State Race to the Top grant is based on the inflated test scores of 2009, not on the recalibrated scores of 2010.)

This whole reliance on testing shifts the balance of power in the classroom. And it's not just New York State. This legislation is coming by way of the Obama administration and Secretary Duncan, who think it is terrific to judge teachers by student test scores. If the students are absent, it's the teacher's fault. If the students choose to withhold effort, they now have the power to fire their teacher. All of the outcomes are going to be bad for kids, bad for teachers, bad for education. Both evidence and common sense are totally against using tests for teacher evaluation, and we are doing it anyway.

Dodge: I used to do all kinds of projects with kids when I was an English teacher that, quite frankly, I don't know if I would take the time to do anymore.

Ravitch: It's inevitable that if you are testing reading and math, everything else is going to get less time. The response has been, "OK, we will test everything." New York City is now going to take \$67 million of its Race to the Top money to develop new tests in science and in social studies. Eventually they will seek to develop tests for everything so that no teacher can be left unscathed.

Dodge: David Berliner told a story about two doctors who are walking beside a river and see somebody drowning. They take the person out of the river and save his life and then all of a sudden they see another person floating down the stream. They pull him out, and they save his life, but then here comes another, and another, and another. Finally, one of the doctors starts running upstream. The other doctor says, "Where are you going?" The first replies, "I am going to find out why they are falling in."

Berliner used this story to point out that while the ostensible cause of student failure may be the teacher, are we looking upstream to find out what the problem is? Do we look into communities? Do we look at poverty? Do we look at the home life of children before we blame the teacher?

Ravitch: Since the Coleman report was released in 1966, we have known about the effects of poverty and social disadvantage on children's academic performance. Yet inequality and equal access to education continue to limit children's lives. You could go right now to the College Board's website and look at a page that shows a tight correlation between SAT scores and family income. The kids at the bottom with the lowest scores come from families who have the lowest income, and the kids at the top come from families who have the highest income. Look at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores—again, family income is a predictor of test scores. That doesn't have anything to do with whether they have good teachers or bad teachers.

Kids who are homeless, who don't speak English, who have preventable illnesses, and who live in communities where there is a lot of violence, have challenges. These challenges come with poverty and get in the way of high achievement. Even before the very first day that children arrive in school, there is an achievement gap. Some children have had exposure to lots of vocabulary, and others have not. It's not the children's fault, and it's not their families' fault; it's the result of poverty. If we don't address the cause, we will just continue blaming teachers.

The corporate elites say that teachers are using poverty as an excuse, but they excuse themselves from having to do anything about poverty. They don't worry about the effects of outsourcing jobs. They don't worry about the fact that 20 percent of the nation's children live in poverty. They are let off the hook if the conversation continues to be about blaming teachers. The problem is that if they are sincerely interested in education, this is a poisonous narrative. If you so poison the public mind against teachers, then who will teach?

Dodge: I would like to turn the subject to choice. I heard an educator describe parents wearing T-shirts at a

pro-charter rally that said, "My School, My Choice." Does choice give traditionally underserved populations a sense of empowerment?

Ravitch: Clearly some charters do what charters originally were supposed to do, which is to serve kids with high needs. I recently met someone who runs a charter for autistic children that's doing incredible work. The first charter ever created in Saint Paul, Minnesota, helps kids who were dropouts get their life back together again. That's what charters should do.

But many charters are working to compete with and replace the regular public schools. In New York City, two-thirds of the charter schools are installed in what has become known as colocation. Charter schools are wedged into public school buildings, so the public school loses its art room, music room, and resource room. The charter movement has taken on the banner of "We are better than you are, and choice is better than the public school."

Many people behind the charter movement are actively seeking the destabilization of public education and have the support of wealthy Wall Street hedge fund managers and philanthropic money. The choice movement has created enormous entrepreneurial and profit-making activity. Across the country, some CEOs of small charter schools get paid \$400,000 per year. This is in no way replicable.

What is so wrong about this is that public education is vital to our democracy. It would be a tragedy if children had no more neighborhood public school. The public school is a building block of democracy. It's where neighbors meet and where families get involved in community action. Have every child on a bus heading to school outside the neighborhood, and you lose one of the elements that make a democratic society.

Dodge: Let's talk about Race to the Top, which ironically has followed No Child Left Behind. What about this notion of competition from state to state, district to district, school to school, kid to kid?

Ravitch: Race to the Top incentivizes schools to do all the wrong things—like open more privately managed schools and judge teachers by student test scores. The basic idea of American federal education policy since 1965 has been equity and equality of educational opportunity. That's why we had a formula for the dispensation of federal funding based on need. We now have the Obama administration saying, "No, no, no, we want competition." Who wins competitions? The swiftest—and those who have the money to hire the best grant writers.

A race means there will be few winners and lots of losers. What does the top mean anyway? The top test score? It won't be our children who benefit. What we want is equity of resources. We want high-quality early childhood education in our communities. We want communities and parents to be involved in any decision about the closing of a school. We want stable and experienced teachers in our communities. We want to be sure that all of our children have access to good public schools. Now, that's all different from Race to the Top.

Competition is a good thing in the right place. In the free market, we end up with better mouse traps as a result of competition. Maybe we get better products on our grocery shelves. Competition is good in foot races and in football.

However, there are certain things that belong to the public sector that should not be competitive. We have a police station in the neighborhood. We have a fire house in the neighborhood. I don't care if my fire department puts out more fires than somebody else's. I just care that when I have a fire, firefighters are there and I can call them and they will respond. There should be a public school in every neighborhood. There should be a public library that's accessible to every community. To privatize these and say now you have a choice, that's the wrong way to think.

The private sector should do what it does best, and the public sector should do what it does best. And we should work to make public facilities the best they can possibly be. In those neighborhoods that don't have good public facilities, we have an obligation to make them far better because their needs are greater.

Dodge: *Are you at all optimistic about the future?*

Ravitch: Here is what I am hopeful about. First of all, teachers are getting organized. The Save Our Schools march this past July was led not by the "bad" teachers who are going to be fired, but by National Board–Certified teachers. These teachers realize that you don't improve schools by beating up on the people who do the work. Second, I am hopeful that the parent groups like Parents Across America will become more vocal.

I am also hopeful because the evidence keeps accumulating that the agenda of the corporate reform movement is wrong. A major study from the National Research Council² says that our reliance on test-based incentives doesn't work. A study from the National Center on Education and the Economy³ points out that other nations around the world are not judging teachers by test scores and are not testing students every year. Yet these nations are building strong education professions. And they would never dream of bringing in a non-educator to be the superintendent of a major school system.

The evidence is getting stronger and stronger over time. But we need to continue building the case about the importance of education, about the importance of having strong professionals, about the importance of having children ready to learn, about the importance of the family, about the importance of the community.

What gives me optimism is to know as a historian that the corporate reform movement and the testing mania are going to end. These ideas advance a narrow behaviorist agenda, not the needs of the 21st century. They do not promote the critical thinking, the innovative ideas, required for the future. History will not look kindly on those who supported the retrograde ideas of the current era.

The thing that worries me most is how many lives will be damaged in the meanwhile. How many kids will be harmed? How many good teachers will lose hope and leave? Who will want to be a principal? I don't know how long this wrongheaded movement will last. I don't have a crystal ball. But I don't believe this thinking will ultimately prevail because in the end what they are doing is wrong. We have to fight for a different narrative, one that makes sense to parents, one that's right for kids, and one that's right for education.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gardner, W. (2011, February 7). The golden age of education never was [blog post]. Retrieved from *Walt Gardner's Reality Check* at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/walt_gardners_reality_check/2011/02/the_golden_age_of_education_never_was.html
- ² Hout, M., & Elliot, S.W. (Eds.). (2011). *Incentives and test-based accountability in education*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- ³ Tucker, M. S. (2011). *Standing on the shoulders of giants: An American agenda for education reform*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy.

Diane Ravitch is a research professor of education at New York University, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a former assistant secretary of education in the first Bush administration, and the author of 10 books and 500 articles. Her latest book is *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (Basic Books, 2010). **Arnold Dodge** is the chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Administration at Long Island University–C.W. Post Campus. He served as a New York State teacher, principal, and superintendent for 37 years.

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