

Ravitch: Standardized Testing Undermines Teaching

by NPR STAFF



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Diane Ravitch is a historian of education and the former United States assistant secretary of education. She currently teaches at New York University.

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Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch was once an early advocate of No Child Left Behind, school vouchers and charter schools.

In 2005, she wrote, "We should thank President George W. Bush and Congress for passing the No Child Left Behind Act. ... All this attention and focus is paying off for younger students, who are reading and solving mathematics problems better than their parents' generation."

But four years later, Ravitch changed her mind.

"I came to the conclusion ... that No Child Left Behind has turned into a timetable for the

destruction of American public education," she tells *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross. "I had never imagined that the test would someday be turned into a blunt instrument to close schools — or to say whether teachers are good teachers or not — because I always knew children's test scores are far more complicated than the way they're being received today."

Another Point Of View



Rotherham: The Best Schools Are Intentional

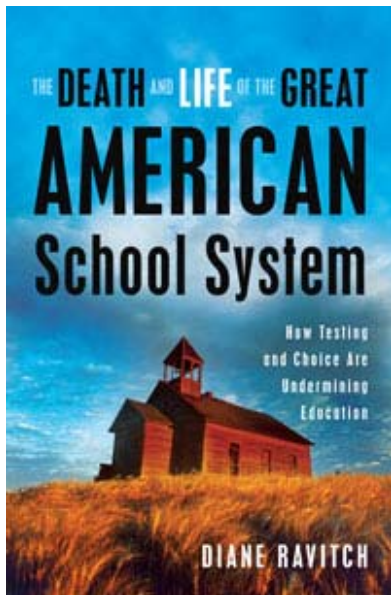
An educational consultant explains how he would redesign American public education.

No Child Left Behind required schools to administer yearly state standardized tests. Student progress on those tests was measured to see if the schools met their Adequate Yearly Progress goals, or AYP. Schools missing those goals for several years in a row could be restructured, replaced or shut down.

"The whole purpose of federal law and state law should be to help schools improve, not to come in and close them down and say, 'We're going to start with a clean slate,' because there's no guarantee that the clean slate's going to be better than the old slate," says Ravitch. "Most of the schools that will be closed are in poor or minority communities where large numbers of children are very poor and large numbers of children don't speak English. They have high needs. They come from all kinds of difficult circumstances and they need help — they don't need their school closed."

In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch criticizes the emphasis on standardized testing and closing schools as well as the practice to replace public schools with charter schools. One reason, she says, is the increasing emphasis on privatization.

"What has happened ... is that [charter schools have] become an enormous entrepreneurial activity and the private sector has moved in," she says. "So there are now charter chains where the



The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education

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heads are paying themselves \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000 a year. They compete with regular public schools. They do not see themselves as collaborators with public schools but business competitors and in some cases, they actually want to take away the public school space and take away the public school business."

Ravitch says that charter schools undercut the opportunities for public schools, making public school students feel like "second-class citizens."

"Regular public school parents are angry because they no longer have an art room, they no longer have a computer room — whatever space they had for extra activities gets given to the charters and then they have better facilities. They have a lot of philanthropic money behind them — Wall Street hedge fund managers have made this their favorite cause. So at least in [New York City] they are better-funded ... so they have better everything."

But change in the public schools is possible, says Ravitch, if parents work together.

"In the neighborhood where I live in Brooklyn, there was a school that was considered a bad public school and it enrolled many children from a local public housing project," she says. "But parents in the neighborhood who were middle-class parents and were educated people banded together and decided, 'Well, if we all send our child to the local public school, it will get better.' And it did get better and it's now one of the best schools in the city. So yes, you can change the neighborhood school. ... But school officials have a particular responsibility to make sure there's a good school in every neighborhood. And handing the schools in low-income neighborhoods over to entrepreneurs does not, in itself, improve them. It's simply a way of avoiding the public responsibility to provide good education."

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Interview Highlights

On the Obama administration's Race to the Top program

"Race to the Top is an extension of No Child Left Behind. It contains all of the punitive features. It encourages states to have more charter schools. It said, when it invited proposals from states, that you needed to have more charter schools, you needed to have merit pay — which is a terrible idea — you needed to judge teachers by test scores, which is even a worse idea. And you need to be prepared to turn around low-performing schools. So this is what many state legislators adopted hoping to get money from Race to the Top. Only 11 states and the District of Columbia did get that money. These were all bad ideas. They were terrible ideas that won't help schools. They're

all schools that work on the free-market model that with more incentives and competition, schools will somehow get better. And the turnaround idea is a particularly noxious idea because it usually means

close the school, fire the principal, fire the staff, and then it sets off a game of musical chairs where teachers from one low-performing school are hired at another low-performing school."

On teachers unions

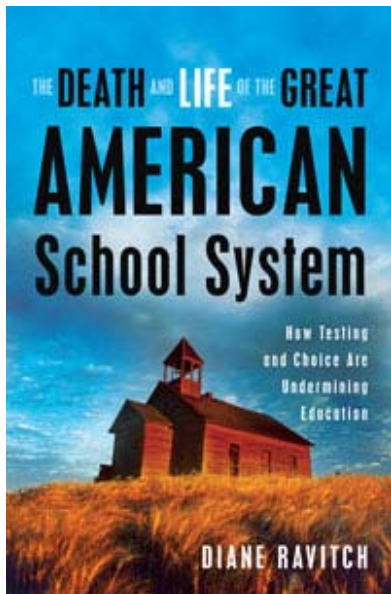
"They're not the problem. The state with the highest scores on the national test, that state is Massachusetts — which is 100 percent union. The nation with the highest scores in the world is Finland, which is 100 percent union. Management and labor can always work together around the needs of children if they're willing to. I think what's happening in Wisconsin and Ohio and Florida and Indiana is very, very conservative right-wing governors want to break the unions because the unions provide support to the Democratic Party. But the unions really aren't the problem in education."

On the film *Waiting for Superman*

"*Waiting for Superman* is a pro-privatization propaganda film. I reviewed it in *The New York Review of Books* and its statistics were wrong, its charges were wrong, it made claims that were unsustainable. One of the charter schools it featured as being a miracle school has an attrition rate of 75 percent. And it made the claim that 70 percent of American eighth-graders read below grade level and that's simply false. ... And the producers of the film are very supportive of vouchers and free-market strategies and everything else. So I think that film has to be taken not just with a grain of salt, but understood to be a pro-privatization film."

Excerpt: 'The Death and Life of the Great American School System'

by DIANE RAVITCH



In the fall of 2007, I reluctantly decided to have my office repainted. It was inconvenient. I work at home, on the top floor of a nineteenth-century brownstone in Brooklyn. Not only did I have to stop working for three weeks, but I had the additional burden of packing up and removing everything in my office. I had to relocate fifty boxes of books and files to other rooms in the house until the painting job was complete.

After the patching, plastering, and painting was done, I began unpacking twenty years of papers and books, discarding those I no longer wanted, and placing articles into scrapbooks. You may wonder what all this mundane stuff has to do with my life in the education field. I found that the chore of reorganizing the artifacts of my professional life was pleasantly ruminative. It had a tonic effect, because it allowed me to reflect on the changes in my views over the years.

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At the very time that I was packing up my books and belongings, I was going through an intellectual crisis. I was aware that I had undergone a wrenching transformation in my perspective on school reform. Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice, and markets, I now found myself experiencing

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profound skepticism about these same ideas. I was trying to sort through the evidence about what was working and what was not. I was trying to understand why I was increasingly skeptical about these reforms, reforms that I had supported enthusiastically. I was trying to see my way through the blinding assumptions of ideology and politics, including my own. I kept asking myself why I was losing confidence in these reforms. My answer: I have a right to change my mind. Fair enough. But why, I kept wondering, why had I changed my mind? What was the compelling evidence that prompted me to reevaluate the policies I had endorsed many times over the previous decade? Why did I now doubt ideas I once had advocated?

The short answer is that my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality. The long answer is what will follow in the rest of this book. When someone chastised John Maynard Keynes for reversing himself about a particular economic policy he had previously endorsed, he replied, 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?' This comment may or may not be apocryphal, but I admire the thought behind it. It is the mark of a sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice.

What should we think of someone who never admits error, never entertains doubt but adheres unflinchingly to the same ideas all his life, regardless of new evidence? Doubt and skepticism are signs of rationality. When we are too certain of our opinions, we run the risk of ignoring any evidence that conflicts with our views. It is doubt that shows we are still thinking, still willing to reexamine hardened beliefs when confronted with new facts and new evidence.

The task of sorting my articles gave me the opportunity to review what I had written at different times, beginning in the mid-1960s. As I flipped from article to article, I kept asking myself, how far had I strayed from where I started? Was it like me to shuffle off ideas like an ill-fitting coat? As I read and skimmed and remembered, I began to see two themes at the center of what I have been writing for more than four decades. One constant has been my skepticism about ill-considered fads, enthusiasms, movements, and theories. The other has been a deep belief in the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum, especially in history and literature, both of which are so frequently ignored, trivialized, or politicized.

Over the years, I have consistently warned against the lure of 'the royal road to learning,' the notion that some savant or organization has found an easy solution to the problems of American education. As a historian of education, I have often studied the rise and fall of grand ideas that were promoted as the sure cure for whatever ills were afflicting our schools and students. In 1907, William Chandler Bagley complained about the 'fads and reforms that sweep through the educational system at periodic intervals.' A few years later, William Henry Maxwell, the esteemed superintendent of schools in New York City, heaped scorn on educational theorists who promoted their panaceas to gullible teachers; one, he said, insisted that 'vertical penmanship' was the answer to all problems; another maintained that recess was a 'relic of barbarism.' Still others wanted to ban spelling and grammar to make school more fun. I have tried to show in my work the persistence of our national infatuation with fads, movements, and reforms, which invariably distract us from the steadiness of purpose needed to improve our schools. In our own day, policymakers and business leaders have eagerly enlisted in a movement launched by free-market advocates, with the support of major foundations. Many educators have their doubts about the slogans and cure-alls of our time, but they are required to follow the mandates of federal law (such as No Child Left Behind) despite their doubts.

In our day, school reformers sometimes resemble the characters in Dr. Seuss's Solla Sollew, who are always searching for that mythical land 'where they never have troubles, at least very few.' Or like Dumbo, they are convinced they could fly if only they had a magic feather. In my writings, I have consistently warned that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets. For certain, there are no magic feathers that enable elephants to fly.

As I flipped through the yellowing pages in my scrapbooks, I started to understand the recent redirection of my thinking, my growing doubt regarding popular proposals for choice and accountability. Once again, I realized, I was turning skeptical in response to panaceas and miracle cures. The only difference was that in this case, I too had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. They promised to end bureaucracy, to ensure that poor children were not neglected, to empower poor parents, to enable poor children to escape failing schools, and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, black and white. Testing would shine a spotlight on low-performing schools, and choice would create opportunities for poor kids to leave for better schools. All of this seemed to make sense, but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. I wanted to share the promise and the hope. I wanted to believe that choice and accountability would produce great results. But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw, the more I lost the faith.

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