



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

Diane Ravitch

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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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