

## **The Death and Life of the Great American School System**

**By Diane Ravitch**

No time to read a 270-page book? No problem! Each week A4PEP will post excerpts from this book – highlighting the text and page number for each excerpt. There are 11 chapters. We will add a chapter each week. It will be quick and easy reading for you so be sure to check our website each week for the next enlightening chapter of this book.

First let's learn a bit about the author.

**About the author:** From 1991 to 1993 Diane Ravitch was Asst. Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board which oversees federal testing. She criticizes reformers "for backing teacher evaluations based on student test scores, closing failing schools, and expanding charter schools." Ravitch turned her attention to poverty and racial segregation which she now considers the main causes of low student achievement.

To the book, written in 2010 but still so very relevant today...

### **Chapter 1 – What I Learned About School Reform**

Sanctions embedded in NCLB were, in fact, not only ineffective but certain to contribute to the privatization of large chunks of public education.

- Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic about the potential benefit of testing, accountability, choice and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas. (p. 1)
- 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. (p.2)
- In education, the belief in market forces lets us ordinary mortals off the hook, especially those who have not figured out how to improve low-performing schools or to break through the lassitude of unmotivated teens. One need not know anything about children or education. The lure of the market is the idea that freedom from government regulation is a solution all by itself. (p.11)
- I grew increasingly disaffected from both the choice movement and the accountability movement. I concluded that curriculum and instruction were far more important than choice and accountability. Testing, I realized with dismay, had become a central preoccupation in the schools. (p.12)

## **Chapter 2 – Hijacked! How the Standards Movement Turned Into the Testing Movement**

- NCLB (2002) changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality. (p.15)
- How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix our schools? Measure, then punish or reward. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators, but it had nothing to do with education. (p.16)
- In this new era, school reform was characterized as accountability, high-stakes testing, data driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay and competition among schools. Whatever could not be measured did not count. (p21)
- 1983 – A Nation at Risk was notable for what it did not say. It did not support or even discuss vouchers, school prayer, market-based competition and choice among schools. It did not suggest restructuring schools, closing schools, privatization, state takeover or other heavy-handed accountability. (p25)
  - It referred to testing only briefly. Instead, it addressed problems that were intrinsic to schooling such as curriculum, graduation requirements, teacher preparation and quality of textbooks.
- The goal of testing was higher scores, without regard to whether students acquired any knowledge of history, science, literature, geography, the arts and other not-tested subjects. (p. 30)

### **Chapter 3 – The Transformation of District 2**

- School District 2 in NYC became a national symbol of success in the late 1990's for raising achievement. (p33)
- Anthony Alvarado, Supt. Of District 2, advocated for small schools and Balanced Literacy (meant to be a bridge between phonics and whole language) with large blocks of time set aside each day for literacy instruction. (P 34 -35)
- Alvarado made a conscious choice to invest in professional development rather than reduce class size. He even eliminated most classroom aides to free up funds for professional development almost all of which focused on reading and literacy. (p.37)
- Alvarado replaced 2/3 of the district's principals and over half the teachers in his 11 yr tenure. (p.36)
- The degree of micromanagement was astounding. Those who challenged the district office's mandates risked getting an unsatisfactory rating or being fired. (p 41)
- During Alvarado's tenure (1987-1998), District 2 was becoming whiter and more affluent than other urban districts which leads one to question whether the gains were solely due to pedagogical reforms. (p.44-45)
- When the new corporate-style reform leaders learned about District 2, they thought they had found the secret to raising achievement – that it could be transplanted elsewhere and get results quickly. (p.46)

## **Chapter 4 – Lessons from San Diego**

- San Diego (1998-2005) – business community backed a slate of school board candidates – they won. The school board then hired a non-educator, Alan Bersin, (a former federal prosecutor), as superintendent. Bersin invited Alvarado to join him in San Diego launching radical reform, disciplining resistant teachers, and firing reluctant principals – the “get-tough superintendent.” (p47)
- Spring 2000, Bersin submitted his “Blueprint for Student Success” – intensive professional development, summer school, longer school days. Cost for professional development rose from \$1 million to \$70 million paid for by shifting Federal Title I funds from individual schools to the central office and firing over 600 classroom aides. Bersin also raised \$50 million from Foundations. (Gates, Hewlett, Carnegie & Broad) (p51)
- Board approved the Blueprint (3-2 vote) in spite of concern over narrowing the curriculum. Bersin disdained school-based decision making. The Bersin-Alvarado strategy was: 1) Do it fast, 2) Do it deep, 3) Take no prisoners. Bersin made no apologies. During his tenure, 90% of the principals were replaced and teacher attrition was high (p53)
- Mandated professional development sessions were not opportunities for reflection and collegiality, but a time for teachers to be told what to do and how to do it. Unquestioning compliance was expected. (p55)
- In 2000 School Board election, business leaders and foundations (Walton, Broad) contributed \$700,000 to defeat anti-Bersin board member Zimmerman. She won anyway(barely) but the board remained 3-2 in favor of Bersin. (p55)
- In Feb 2003, Alvarado announced his departure. In 2004, Bersin lost his slim margin of control of the school board. Bersin announced his resignation in Jan. 2005 (p56)
- Stress-related illness called “Bersinitis” was prevalent; teachers came to clinics “in droves” with “work-related depression and anxiety” (p64-65)

## **Chapter 5 – The Business Model in New York City**

- 2001 -- Michael Bloomberg elected mayor of NYC and vowed to gain control of the public schools. He did not want an independent board of education. He wanted full, direct control of the schools with no meddlesome board to second-guess him. In 2002, the state legislature turned control of the public schools over to Bloomberg who changed the board's name to Panel for Educational Policy and made it clear that he considered the panel of no importance. He sold the Department of Education headquarters to a developer. (p70)
- Bloomberg offered top education job to Joel Klein who soon after being appointed, visited Bersin in San Diego. In January 2003 the mayor announced his reform program called "Children First".
  - Mandated Balanced Literacy
  - Eliminated 32 school districts, replaced by 10 large regions.
  - Creation of privately funded leadership academies for principals (\$75 million in private funds)
  - Promise of greater parental involvement – however, new structure actually reduced parental involvement with the elimination of many local school boards. Parents didn't know whom to contact. (p 72-73)
- Klein's reorganization was a corporate model of tightly centralized, top-down control. He surrounded himself with non-educators – lawyers, business school graduates. (p73)
- No uniform curriculum. Minimal attention to science, history, literature, geography, civics, the arts or other subjects. In 2007 funding earmarked for arts education (\$67.5 million) was changed to discretionary funding for districts. By 2008, only 4% met the requirements for arts education and by 2009 nearly a third of the schools had no arts teachers. Schools were accountable only for test scores in reading and math. (p73-76)
- In 2007 – Klein abolished the regions and eliminated all direct supervision of schools, saying supervision was no longer needed because every school would be judged solely by its results – that is, whether it raised test scores. (p.75)
- Large contracts were awarded to companies that specialized in test preparation and schools dedicated large blocks of time to practice for the tests. (p76).

Psychometrician Robert Tobias said, “much of this test preparation is not designed to increase student learning, but rather, to try to beat or game the test. (p90)

- Original “Children First” document had little about charter schools but Klein soon embraced them and they received priority treatment. Charters typically had smaller classes and more resources, especially if they had philanthropic sponsors. (p.80)
- NAEP reported that NYC made no significant gains in reading or mathematics between 2003 and 2007, nor was there any narrowing of the achievement gap. (p87)

## **Chapter 6 –NCLB: Measure and Punish**

- My support for NCLB remained strong until Nov. 30, 2006 --- the day I realized that NCLB was a failure at a conference at the American Enterprise Institute – a well-respected conservative think tank – to hear a dozen scholars present their analyses of NCLB remedies. (p.99)
- Choice was not working. Only a tiny percentage of eligible students asked to transfer to better schools – parents and students didn’t want to leave their neighborhood schools. Free after-school tutoring fared only a bit better. No more than 20% of eligible student in any state actually received it even though it was free and readily available. (p.100)
- Adult interests were well served by NCLB. The law generated huge revenues for tutoring and testing services which became a sizable industry. Test-prep materials were raking in billions of dollars. Sanctions embedded in NCLB were, in fact, not only ineffective but certain to contribute to the privatization of large chunks of public education. (p. 101 - 102)
- Most toxic flaw = proficiency requirement for all by 2014. No one truly expects that all students will be proficient by 2014. Only politicians promise such things. The most dangerous potential effect of the 2014 goal is that it is a timetable for the demolition of public education in the United States. (p. 103 - p104)
- NCLB = shrinking of time available to teach anything other than reading & math. Test scores became an obsession with drill and practice a significant part of the daily routine. (p. 107)
- NCLB did not bring about rapidly improving test scores. Gains on NAEP (national testing) were modest or non-existent. (p. 109)
- Achievement gaps between black and white students narrowed more before the implementation of NCLB than in the years afterward. (p. 110)

- NCLB remedies did not work. Its sanctions were ineffective. It was a punitive law based on erroneous assumptions. It assumed that shaming schools would lead to higher scores. It assumed that low scores are caused by lazy teachers and lazy principals who need to be threatened with the loss of their jobs. (p. 110)
- Testing is not a substitute for curriculum and instruction. Good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators and closing schools. (p. 111)

## **Chapter 7 – Choice: The Story of an Idea – Part 1**

- When Congress passed the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, it decided to permit needy students in religious schools to receive federal aid for remedial services. (p. 116)
- Until the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the issue of school choice remained far outside the mainstream, mainly because it was viewed by the media and elected officials as a means to permit white students to escape court-ordered desegregation. (p. 116)
- After Reagan was elected, he advocated school choice, specifically vouchers. Reagan's first Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, did not support vouchers and school prayer, nor Reagan's desire to eliminate the U.S. Dept of Education. Bell resigned in 1985 and William Bennett was appointed, an enthusiastic supporter of choice. (p.117)
- Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and rebuffed the Reagan agenda but many foundations embraced it. (Heritage, Cato Institute, John Olin Foundation, Bradley Foundation, etc.) (p.117)
- 1988 Prof Ray Budde (Massachusetts) first proposed charter concept. He envisioned teams of teachers with a bold vision taking risks to explore the unknown. In the same year, Albert Shanker (Pres. of AFT) suggested that groups of teachers should be able to run their own schools within regular schools to pursue innovative ways of educating disaffected students. They would be tasked with solving important problems of pedagogy and curriculum and expected to produce findings that would help other schools. (p. 122-123)
- In 1993 Shanker withdrew his endorsement of charter schools and became a vociferous critic. He realized that the idea he so enthusiastically embraced was being taken over by corporations, entrepreneurs, and practitioners of "do your own thing", at the cutting edge of an effort to privatize the public schools. (p. 123 – 124)

- In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a law authorizing the creation of charter schools and from there, the movement took off with the conservative Heritage Foundation leading the battle for charter schools across the nation. (p125)
- As more and more charter schools opened, more and more Catholic schools closed their doors. Between 1990 and 2008, 1300 Catholic schools that served over 300,000 kids closed their doors. (p. 128)

## **Chapter 7 – Choice: The Story of an Idea – Part 2**

- Vouchers: In 2009, a balanced team of researchers found no major differences between student performance in voucher schools and those in regular public schools. Twenty years after the initiation of vouchers in Milwaukee, the gap between white and African American students in Wisconsin was one of the largest in the nation. (p. 129-132)
- 2004 – NAEP showed no measureable differences between charter and non-charter on 4<sup>th</sup> grade tests in reading and mathematics for students with similar ethnic/racial backgrounds. Among poor students, 4<sup>th</sup> graders in regular public schools outperformed those in charters in both reading and math. (p. 138)
- Public Schools vs. Private Schools – 2006 US Dept of Ed Study – found that public school students performed as well as or better than comparable children in private schools. (p140)
- 2009 study in Boston showed that Boston charters enrolled a smaller percentage special ed and ELL students and that charters probably promoted racial segregation. (p140-142)
- Charter schools are havens for the motivated, leaving the most difficult students to educate in the traditional schools. If charter schools continue to grow, we can safely predict that future studies will “prove” the success of charter schools and the failure of regular schools because the regular schools will have disproportionate numbers of less motivated parents and needier kids. (p. 145)
- Lost was the original vision of charter schools in which they were supposed to help solve some of the hardest problems in public education. They were not intended to siphon away the most motivated students and families in the poorest communities. (p.146)



- The rhetoric of many charter school advocates has come to sound uncannily similar to the rhetoric of voucher proponents and the most rabid haters of public schooling. They often sound as if they want public schools to fail. (p. 146)
- In barely 20 years, given the uneven results from charters, it is surprising how they have advanced and even more surprising is how few voices have been raised on behalf of the democratic vision of public education. (p. 147)

## **Chapter 8 – The Trouble with Accountability**

- Testing experts warn that all tests have a margin of error and that test scores cannot reliably serve as a measure of the teacher's skill (p. 152-153)
- Committee on Appropriate Test Use of the National Research Council warned in 1999, "an educational decision that will have major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score" Now ten years later, there is the push to evaluate teachers on the basis of student test scores (p. 153)
- High stakes testing (test-based accountability) corrupts the very purpose of schooling by causing practitioners to focus on the measure rather than on the goals of education. (p160)
- The testing industry has boomed and corporate style superintendents have become popular (p162)
- Nowhere in the federal accountability mandate are there measures or indicators of students' diligence, effort and motivation. The law forgot that parents are primarily responsible for their children's behavior and attitudes, (p162-163)
- NCLB assumes that accountability based solely on test scores will reform American education. This is a mistake. (p163)
- None of us would want to be evaluated – with our reputation and livelihood on the line – solely on the basis of an instrument that is prone to error and ambiguity. ( 166)

- Schools are responsible for shaping character, developing sound minds in healthy bodies and forming citizens for our democracy, not just for teaching basic skills. (p 167)

### **Chapter 9 – What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?**

- High school English teacher Mrs. Ratliff, the teacher influenced me the most, was a great teacher, but I don't think she would have been considered a "great teacher" if she had had been judged by the kind of hard data that is used now. Her classes produced no hard data (p. 170)
- Data driven education leaders say we need more effective teachers and that teachers' unions protect ineffective teachers. Their solution is to get rid of unions and fire the teachers whose students get low scores. (p. 171)
- No one has demonstrated a clear correlation between teacher unionism and academic achievement, either negative or positive. The difference in performance is probably due to economics, not unionization. (p. 175)
- Five years before NCLB, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future proposed higher standards for teacher education programs, high quality professional development, and a greater commitment to professionalism. It specifically rejected schemes to connect teacher pay to students' test scores warning such practices are crude measures that don't take into account multiple influencing factors. (p. 178)
- After NCLB, everything changed and raising test scores became the singular focus. (p. 178)

- President Obama's education program included large sums of money for states to build data systems that would link student test scores to individual teachers, as well as merit pay to reward teachers who raise student test scores. ( p. 183)
- According to some school reformers, the teacher was everything but the teacher did not need to have any paper credentials or teacher education – anyone should be able to enter the profession and show whether she or he could raise test scores. (p. 184)
- As we expand the reward and compensation for teachers who boost scores in basic skills, will we honor those teachers who awaken in their students a passionate interest in history, science, the arts, literature and foreign language? If we fail to attract and retain teachers like Ruby Ratliff, will we produce a better-educated citizenry? Will our schools encourage the innovative thinkers who advance society? It is not likely. (p. 194)

## **Chapter 10 – The Billionaire Boys' Club**

- Foundations exist to enable extremely wealthy people to shelter a portion of their capital from taxation and then to use the money for socially beneficial purposes. Foundations themselves may not engage in political advocacy, but they may legally fund organizations that do. (p 197)
- Gates, Walton and Broad converged in support of reform strategies that mirrored their own experience in acquiring huge fortunes such as competition, choice, deregulation, incentive and other market-based approaches. (p. 200)
- There is something fundamentally antidemocratic about relinquishing control of the public education policy agenda to private foundations run by society's wealthiest people. If voters don't like the foundations' reform agenda, they can't vote them out of office. If their plans fail, no sanctions are levied against them. They are bastions of unaccountable power (p. 200 - 201)
- Gates gave grants to almost every major think tank and advocacy group in the field of education, leaving almost no one willing to criticize his vast power and unchecked influence. (p. 211)

- Gates also planned to put its considerable resources into the proliferation of charter schools. Walton and Eli Broad's education agendas also emphasize charter schools. (p. 212 - 213)
- Broad believes that people perform better if incentives and sanctions are tied to performance and that teachers need not be educators. Schools should be redesigned to function like corporate enterprises replacing neighborhood schools with a competitive marketplace of choices. (p. 213 - 217)
- Instead of asking the states for their best ideas for NCLB2, the Obama administration published a list of 19 of its (or Walton, Gates, Broad) best ideas, few of which are evidenced based, and told states to adopt them if they wanted a chance at Race to the Top dollars. (p. 218-219)
- Business leaders like the idea of turning schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king. Problem is, that dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. Going to school is not the same as shopping. Parents should be able to take their children to the neighborhood school and find a sound educational program with well-educated teachers. Just as every neighborhood should have a reliable fire station, every neighborhood should have a good public school. ( p 221)
- With so much money and power aligned against the neighborhood public school and against education as a profession, public education itself is placed at risk. (p. 222)
- American education has a long history of infatuation with fads and ill-considered ideas. The current obsession with making our schools work like a business may be the worst of them. Who will stand up to the tycoons and politicians and tell them so? (p. 222)

## **Chapter 11 – Lessons Learned**

- The policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools. Indeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective and may further degrade the intellectual capacity of our citizenry. (p. 224)
- As one innovation follows another, as one reform overtakes the last, teachers may be forgiven if from time to time they suffer an acute case of reform fatigue. (p. 224)
- Essential ingredients of a successful education system: a strong curriculum, experienced teachers, effective instruction, willing students, adequate resources and a community that values education. (p. 224)
- Our schools will not improve:
  - If elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that should be made by professional educators (p. 225)
  - If we continue to focus only on reading and mathematics (p.226)
  - If we value only what tests can measure (p. 226)

- If we rely exclusively on tests as the means of deciding the fate of students, teachers principals, and schools (p. 226)
  - If we continue to close neighborhood schools in the name of reform (p.227)
  - If we entrust them to the magical powers of the market. Markets have winners and losers. (p. 227)
  - If charter schools siphon away the most motivated students and their families in the poorest communities. (p. 227)
  - If we expect them to act like private, profit-seeking enterprises. Schools are not businesses – they are a public good. (p.227)
  - If we continue to drive away experienced principals and replace them with neophytes who have taken a leadership training course. ( p228)
  - By blind worship of data. (p. 228)
  - By those who say that money doesn't matter. Resources matter. (p. 228)
  - If we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty. (p. 229)
  - If we use them as society's all-purpose punching bag. ( p. 229)
- Every school should have a well-conceived, coherent, sequential curriculum -- not a script but a set of general guidelines for the study of the liberal arts and sciences, history, literature, geography, the sciences, civics, mathematics, the arts and foreign languages as well as health and physical education. ( p. 231)
  - The goal of evaluation should not be to identify schools that must be closed, but to identify schools that need help. The job of educational authorities is to solve problems, not evade them by shuttering schools.
  - Families are children's first teachers. Research shows a huge disparity in language development between children from impoverished families and children from professional families. Families implant basic attitudes and values about learning as well as the self-discipline and good manners necessary for learning in a group. (p239-p. 240)
  - Our public education system is a fundamental element of our democratic society. To the extent we strengthen it, we strengthen our democracy. At the present time, public education is in peril. Current efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. (p. 242)

Pages 243 -271 – End notes documenting the sources and research upon which the book was based.

*The End*