

The Death and Life of the Great American School System  
Diane Ravitch

Excellent book by a longtime insider who can be somewhat brave.

Ravitch talks extensively about statistical tests used to compare school results. Educators are obsessed with percentage point improvement in this or that. In debunking the claims of success in New York's school District 2, Ravitch correlates the increase in test scores with the increase in affluence in the neighborhood. When it comes to ethnicity, they are more careful. They will look at the percentage of black and Hispanic children, and count subsidized lunches.

What they do not look at is native ability, either on the part of the students or the teachers. This is unfortunate. In looking at the consistent success of Catholic schools, Ravitch does not ask an obvious question, how smart and inspiring are the teachers? Those nuns who were teaching want to be there, and want to be teaching, and obviously are not in it for the money. It is common knowledge that schoolteachers in the 40s and 50s were mostly women, as it was one of the best jobs for the college-educated woman could get. They were also nonunionized. They gave the children a lot of themselves. They did not have a sense of entitlement -- Ravitch says they had little in the way of job protection, except in doing a good job. In my school days we had some odd ducks, including Fred Luke, the alcoholic chemistry teacher, and Cheryl Campbell, the lesbian social studies teacher. They were tolerated because they were good teachers. She says that her favorite teacher, Ruby Ratliff, would not have been recognized by statistical measurements, and might not have survived today's bureaucracies.

One educational psychologist whose work would dramatically illuminate the discussion is absent from Ravitch's bibliography. This is no surprise -- he would be absent from almost anybody's, because he is truly the skunk at the garden party. That's Arthur Jensen, the dean of American psychometrician. We cannot blind ourselves to the fact that academic ability -- IQ -- is unequally distributed throughout society. In fact, it is distributed according to that much-maligned bell curve.

By refusing to systematically account for differences in either teacher ability or student ability, Ravitch leaves the two most important variables out of the equation. She has to, of course, because she is a creature of the establishment and would be disinvented quickly if she were to speak the truth, which she certainly knows. Just as Jensen was disinvented 40 years ago when he ventured close to the truth in his notorious sarticle in the Harvard Education Review.

Ravitch asks the right question: what is the purpose of education? The problem is that she is looking for a one dimensional answer -- a solution that fits everybody. She has to recognize that for many members of our population, success will mean showing up at the CVS every day to use the checkout machine that does all the arithmetic for them, or learning how to chop and mulch trees, whereas for others it will mean being able to explain the trade-offs among different types of mortgages, and for yet others it will mean teasing out the complexity is to the human genome. These pursuits require different levels of education, and to some extent even different types of education. We all recognize that at the college level -- we expect that students at Baltimore City College will be exposed to different curricula than those at Columbia. It is perverse not to recognize that these differences are visible much earlier in life.

Ravitch expresses the social justice concern that the charter schools will "skim the cream," leaving the poorest performing students in public schools. Here I would go with John Stuart Mill, "the greatest good for the greatest number," even at the expense of writing off some children as uneducable. Resources are limited, and it is always necessary to give up on children who could certainly be reached were they not. The money is simply better spent providing a richer curriculum to students who are prepared to accept it.

Following on this, one of the basic, and most flawed assumptions and the whole No Child Left Behind program, and one which Ravitch does not challenge, is that all schools should have equal results. Throughout the history of American education there have been schools for exceptional children, and, de facto, schools for the less gifted. If we stop kidding ourselves and prepare the latter to do the best possible job with the students they have, we can save a lot of angst and money as well.

In her discussion of testing, one of the surprises is the continuing integrity of the SAT and NAEP, the benchmarks for comparisons across the country. Of course, there are the international tests such as TIMMS and PISA which are also largely immune from corruption by political processes.

Ravitch is kinder to the educational unions than most. She also does not address teacher qualifications and teacher preparation. That is a weakness, as it is well known that future teachers have the lowest standardized test scores among all college majors, and the teachers unions are strong advocates of the current system of teacher training, and generally obstruct midcareer shifts into teaching with obstacles such as certification requirements.

Ravitch talks back to power, in the form of the huge foundations that are changing American education: Gates, Broad, and Walton. They each bring with them an ideological agenda from the private sector, the innovations they have fostered haven't generally worked any better than former reforms, and the institutions in the educational sector are so indebted to them for money that nobody dares say the Emperor has no clothes. Gates is a smart man. It is hard to believe he could say something as stupid as "if the entire US, for two years, a top quartile teachers, the entire difference between us and Japan would vanish." What incredible hubris!

In summary, a great history and a generally good analysis of the last few decades' battles.