

The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education. (2010). By Diane Ravitch. Basic Books New York: New York.. 242 pp. Notes pgs. 243-271. Index pgs. 273-283. As reviewed by Courtney Bauder. April 26, 2010.

Since the Reagan administration took office nearly three decades ago there has been a significant change in the purpose and function of public schooling. While the era immediately before the 1980s could be classified as a time where public schools grappled with challenges of equity, one could argue that the last 30 years has seen a shift from this desire for equity to an era classified by excellence. Excellence can be an abstract term, yet excellence in regards to education has most recently been measured by achievement on high stakes tests, privatization, free market competition, and both teacher and student accountability. Several sociologists and educators have been particularly fascinated with the implications of this phenomenon. Those who study social structure and education are asking: What is the role of public schooling in an increasingly globalized and competitive world economy? How should success be measured? What, if any, is the significance of public education? And what steps should be taken to ensure both teacher and student accountability and achievement? The following review will offer a critical appraisal of Diane Ravitch's illuminating text, The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education.

In the first chapter, entitled *What I Learned From School Reform*, Ravitch offers that her book aims to “describe the evidence that changed my views about reforms that once seemed promising” and attempts to “explain how these mistaken policies are corrupting educational values” (p. 14).

Readers will be hard-pressed to find an educational historian more widely published and respected than Ravitch. Therefore it should not be surprising that she cites her own previous work with great regularity. While some critics might argue that this compromises the integrity of her work because it limits multiple perspectives, this is not the case. It is rare for an expert with her credentials to challenge her own previously held beliefs and expose this transformation to a wider audience.

In fact, Ravitch rhetorically asks, “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 the evidence? Doubt and skepticism are signs of rationality. When we are too certain of our opinions, we run the risk of ignoring the evidence that conflicts with our views. It is doubt that shows we are still thinking, still waiting to re-examine hardened beliefs when confronted with new facts and new evidence” (p. 2).

Throughout the book, Ravitch employs multiple case studies and historical sketches to articulate her frame of reference and illustrate how she has arrived at her most recent conclusion. She wastes little time in challenging the most recent and controversial federal public education mandate, No Child Left Behind, and explains how the universally valued idea of standards became something unexpected. She expresses deep and well-substantiated concern that NCLB “ignored such important studies as history, civics, literature, science, the arts, and geography” (p. 15-16), and astutely posits that “it was ironic that a conservative Republican president was responsible for the largest expansion of federal control in the history of American education. It was likewise ironic that Democrats embraced market reforms and other initiatives that traditionally had been

favored by Republicans” (p. 21). It is contradictions like these that should give readers pause and provide them an opportunity to question the agendas of these politicians.

Through detailed interviewing, Ravitch gives a u voice to individuals who were often silenced in the conversation surrounding the reforms. While a certain degree of choice is something everyone could support, Ravitch expresses concern about the intentions of its advocates in its current form. Using her historical expertise she educates the reader about how choice first emerged after the *Brown vs. Board* decision, “when the federal government and the federal courts began compelling segregated districts to reassign black and white pupils to integrated schools.” Prosegregationists encouraged “private schools to accommodate white students who did not want to attend an integrated school” (p. 114). She goes on to explain how choice advocates won major battles in Milwaukee and Cleveland in the 1990s and draws the distinction between choice and charter programs themes of accountability, educational foundations, and the purpose of schooling.