

# BCTF Research Report

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## The dearth (or is it the death?) of discourse in the United States: What does Diane Ravitch say about educational change, and why is there so little response?

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Diane Ravitch's book, *The death and life of the great American school system*<sup>1</sup>, is an exploration and critique of educational change in the United States since the report *A Nation at Risk*<sup>2</sup> in 1983 and more specifically since the passing of the No Child Left Behind<sup>3</sup> legislation in January, 2002.

Arguably, there are several reasons for Ravitch's influence which may account for the current and considerable interest in her work. The first is that she occupied the position of Assistant Secretary in charge of Educational Research and Evaluation in the senior George Bush's Republican administration. The second is that she has changed her mind in terms of many of the initiatives she once supported, including school choice, charters, merit pay and accountability. The third is that she has articulated a critique of the changes with a sharp intellect and with considerable evidence, directly challenging not only successive Republican and Democratic governments but also taking on what she terms "the Billionaire Boys' Club" of Bill Gates, the Walton (Walmart) family, and Eli Broad. Her challenge to the boys' club is that its unelected and unrepresentative members unduly influence US policy and negatively impact schools. And yet, in spite of the range and depth of her critique, there appears to be a strangely silent or minimal reaction from those she criticizes.

So how did Ravitch shift from being a vociferous proponent of vouchers, charters and a range of other, largely market-driven, "reforms," to becoming one of their harshest critics? How did she move from being funded by conservative foundations to being opposed to almost everything they support? It was, quite simply, her view of the accumulation of evidence that market-driven, business-oriented reforms were not working, together with her unshakeable belief that she "could not countenance any reforms that might have the effect—intended or unintended—of undermining public education." (p. 13)

<sup>1</sup> Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>2</sup> The National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> 107th Congress: Public Law 107–110—January 8, 2002. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Accessed online at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf>

*A Nation at Risk* spoke of a system committing “unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” but, Ravitch argues, it did not offer vouchers or market-based reforms as solutions. What it did was argue for reforms which included higher standards for entry into teaching and better teacher salaries, as well as strengthened graduation requirements, more time for learning, and an increased focus on the “five new basics”: English, Math, Science, Social Studies and Computer Science, with additional foreign language requirements for the college-bound. Where Ravitch believed it failed was in its assumption that high schools were essentially to blame, and that by changing high schools the problems could be addressed.

The No Child Left Behind legislation differed from *A Nation at Risk* in significant ways. The former was a report that could be used to foster changes. The latter was narrowly-focused legislation requiring compliance, with failure to comply being equated with significant losses of funding. Ravitch argues:

No Child Left Behind...was bereft of any educational ideas. It was a technocratic approach to school reform that measured ‘success’ only in relation to standardized test scores in two skill-based subjects, with the expectation that this limited training would strengthen our nation’s economic competitiveness with other nations. This was misguided since the nations with the most successful school systems do not impose such a narrow focus on their schools. (p. 29)

Thus, test-based accountability in these two areas became the new and narrow measure of success, a foundation for much of what was to follow in school and system change in the 1990s and early 2000s. This short consideration of *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind (discussed in more depth later in this report) is a precursor to Ravitch’s analysis of change in the areas outlined below.

## **1. School District reforms**

### **a. School District #2, New York**

With close to 50 schools and about 20,000 students, this district epitomized change much admired by corporate reformers. It mandated a “balanced literacy” and math programs in all schools in which all teaching activities are prescribed and monitored, along with substantial investment in PD. Performance in the two key subject areas was raised from middle to second of 32 community school districts by the mid-’90s. With a \$6 million plus grant, research teams led by external researchers Resnick and Elmore, but also including the superintendent and other district staff, produced a series of positive reports about the district’s achievements. These reports were challenged, with one issued by Lois Weiner, who critiqued the mandated uniformity of a single approach to meet diverse needs, and the firing of principals against community wishes. She also challenged what she termed “research as cheerleading”, suggesting that the collaboration of researchers and district staff had ignored issues of social and racial segregation as well as the demographic changes—notably gentrification—that were in her view more of a cause of improved scores than the changes in pedagogy as claimed by the research teams.

The importance of School District #2 is that reformers believed it contained the “magic bullet” of reform—focused intervention in two subject areas, mandated and strictly enforced uniform change. Thus the narrowing of focus became entrenched and any external factors, especially rapidly-changing demographics, ignored.

## **b. San Diego**

Based on School District #2's experience, San Diego in the mid-late 1990s encapsulated the "get-tough" approach with increased teacher discipline and firing of reluctant principals. A business community slate won board elections in 1996 and voted to hire a non-educator, Alan Bersin, as superintendent. Bersin then hired the former superintendent of New York's School District #2. While professional development costs rose from \$1 million to \$70 million, the PD was mandated and focused with no choice in terms of content or pedagogy. Ninety percent of school principals were replaced. Teacher attrition doubled in the first two years of the "reforms," and more than a third of the teachers left the district in seven years. In 2004, the business community slate lost the board elections and Bersin resigned in January 2005. Evaluative researchers reported mixed results, with some praising the "get-tough" approach and arguing that improved results justified the approach (Betts) while others (Raymond and Bassok) argued that other Californian districts generated larger gains in terms of student achievement over a similar period. Ravitch suggests that the "political genius" of the Bersin approach was that it combined what she terms the "left-right strategy", empowering the pedagogical left with high PD investment and constructivist approaches, while firing principals and fighting the teacher union, reducing school district administration, and opening charter schools.

Bersin's replacement as superintendent wrote:

I inherited a district in which the driving philosophy over the previous six years had...been to attack the credibility of any educator who spoke out against a top-down education reform model. These attacks allowed those in charge to portray themselves as the defenders of children, to justify any means to promote their model of improving student achievement, and to view their critics through the same apocalyptic lens of good and evil that has characterized many of our national debates. (p. 66)

It appears clear that one "reform" such as that which occurred in School District #2 can have a catalytic effect, in this case spawning larger-scale change using a specific, narrowly-focused blueprint which was heavy on top-down implementation, harsh discipline, and little or no room for adaptation. In the case of San Diego, the changes were orchestrated by a business community with an explicit ideology of hiring tough leadership to create a school board which would counter union influence and introduce strict accountability measures including the firing of educators.

## **c. New York's business model**

Mayoral control of the New York school system was authorized by New York's state legislature in 2002. Ravitch introduces the New York story thus:

In the first decade of the new century, New York City became the new testing ground for market-based reforms. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his Chancellor, Joel Klein, applied business principles to overhaul the nation's largest school system, which enrolled 1.1 million school children. Their reforms won national and even international acclaim. They reorganized the management of schools, battled the teachers' union, granted large pay increases for teachers and principals, pressed for merit pay, opened scores of charter schools, broke up large high schools into smaller ones, emphasized frequent practicing for state tests, gave every school a letter grade, closed dozens of low-performing schools, and institutionalized the ideas of choice and competition (albeit without vouchers). In

2007, only five years after mayoral control was authorized by the state legislature, New York City won the Broad prize as the most improved urban school district in the nation. (p. 69)

Hiring several corporate advisors, Bloomberg introduced his “Children First” program in 2003, with four key components:

- Uniform reading (balanced literacy) and (constructivist) math programs in all save top-performing schools.
- Elimination of 32 community school districts, replaced with ten large regions, with financial management and instruction separated.
- A privately-funded Leadership Academy to train principals.
- A promise of greater parental involvement (but, Ravitch argues, the reality was a structure which reduced it).

The approach which was started in School District #2, and replicated in San Diego, is clearly visible in Bloomberg’s approach in what Ravitch describes as “a corporate model of tightly centralized, top-down control” (p. 73), with a narrow focus on two subject areas and mandated programs. When seven researchers from local universities wrote privately to Klein warning that mandating a single reading method was a mistake, Klein sent a public response in which 100 education professors supported the method. This perhaps minor exchange reflects a more serious issue: there was no engagement in debate about the educational merits of the proposed program, simply an overpowering response—100 signatories in a public statement as a response to seven critics who sent a private communication. The opening of a private communication to a public response also signals that dissent would not be tolerated, whether in the school district or in the Academy. Might, it appears, is right.

The business model rewarded corporations with lucrative and often untendered contracts, one of which (a \$15.8 million contract to cut costs—an oxymoron?) stranded thousands of students in the middle of winter when bus access was cut. Other large contracts went to test preparation companies as the preoccupation with test scores in reading and math became dominant in the mayor’s plan. Arts Education was cut by \$67 million and by 2009 nearly a third of the city’s schools had no Art teachers.

Ravitch initially supported Bloomberg’s reforms but became concerned at the level of unchecked executive power vested in the mayor, seeing this as essentially anti-democratic. As an example of such power, a “Panel for Educational Policy,” its members appointed by the mayor, had replaced the former school board. In 2004, on the only occasion when several appointees indicated they would oppose a mayoral proposal on social promotion, they were fired and no further opposition occurred. Might, once again, was right and dissent was not tolerated.

One of Ravitch’s most damning claims in her book is that New York lowered scores needed to pass tests. New York had “levels” assessed by test scores, with Level 1 being the lowest level of achievement. Between 2006 and 2009, the numbers of students assessed at Level 1 plummeted, not because of increased achievement but because the passing scores were reduced—see the table below:

	<b>Level 1 reading passing score</b>	<b>7<sup>th</sup> Grade math passing score</b>
2006	41%	36.2%
2009	17%	22%

In 2009, mayoral control was extended in spite of parent group opposition (complaining of large class sizes, expanding charter schools using public school facilities, and excessive testing). Large corporate foundations, including the Gates Foundation, pumped millions of dollars into supporting Bloomberg and while 80% of teachers expressed disapproval of the mayor's control, the United Federation of Teachers supported Bloomberg. The mayor, in an adaptation of the "left-right strategy" developed in San Diego, had awarded teachers 43% salary increases and pension improvements.

New York added a substantial number of charter schools, often providing such schools with public facilities. "Choice" was promoted and bizarre experiments were allowed, including a school for future firefighters and another for urban planners (both clearly regular career choices at Grade 9!). At the same time, the concept of the neighbourhood school was diminished as many neighbourhood schools closed or students crossed the city to their "school of choice." About 24 large high schools were closed and two hundred small schools were opened, funded by "hundreds of millions of dollars" of Bill Gates' Foundation money. They were initially allowed to enroll fewer students with special needs, as well as fewer English-language learners, thereby being able to report higher graduation and attendance rates. The remaining large schools became increasingly overcrowded and enrolled a higher proportion of students with special needs. Over time the small schools' students more closely resembled the typical student population, and the attendance and graduation rates declined.

Accountability claims made by city and state varied widely. In 2007, each school was rated on an A–F rating, purely dependent on test score improvements or declines. Some high-quality schools were rated as "F" when scores declined marginally while some schools considered and rated by the State Department as physically dangerous were rated "A". The city awarded "A" or "B" grades to schools regarded as failing to make adequate progress by State Boards. By 2009 even the New York press was ridiculing city claims that 84% of elementary and middle schools received "A" grades.

In addition, while Bloomberg and Klein lauded what they claimed to be major improvements in the test scores, the actual evidence was mixed. Fourth-grade improvements in reading and math test scores were considerably less in the Bloomberg era than in the four pre-mayoral-control years, while there appeared to be gains in Grade 8 reading and math scores. However, when New York students were tested by the federal NAEP, New York students made no significant gains in either reading or math between 2003 and 2007. Graduation rates, Ravitch claims, were inflated by not counting many dropouts and by a "credit recovery" system where students who failed or never showed up for courses could complete an independent project and still graduate.

There appears little evidence of serious critical analysis of New York's mayoral rule over education. Why were city test scores touted as successful when many "improved" scores were at lower rates than in comparable periods before? Why did city test scores appear so much more impressive than federal tests of the same students? Why have so many subjects been downgraded with disastrous results? If there was such improvement, why did 28 of 32 New York school districts place in the bottom tenth percentile of state districts in Science (26 of 32 in Social Studies)? Why did some of the most celebrated and publicized schools see their one-year test score improvements disintegrate the following year, and why was there no publicity about the subsequent decline? Why have media been so supportive of Bloomberg, yet failed to consider even the simplest of analysis which might expose mixed results and dubious manipulation of data?

## 2. No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Ravitch, who initially supported NCLB, outlined the seven accountability factors which included testing in schools receiving federal funding for students in Grades 3 through to 8, with an expectation of “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), and increasingly onerous sanctions for schools failing to show adequate progress. Such sanctions included restructuring that could mean converting to charter school status or giving control to private management. Both Democrats and Republicans believed that increased accountability would raise student achievement.

Ravitch’s conversion on the issue of NCLB occurred because she believed, from the evidence offered in reviews, that NCLB simply did not work. In 2007–08, 35.6% of American public schools failed to make adequate yearly progress, as defined by NCLB, and with 2014 the deadline for the unreachable goal that all students must be proficient in reading and math, she argues that many more schools will become charters, become privately managed, or go through some other form of restructuring. This forecast appears accurate, with substantial federal grants awarded to two states (New York and Florida) in late July 2011:

Cash-strapped New York State is receiving a \$113 million federal windfall to help create new charter schools and spread the most effective practices at existing ones, officials announced yesterday. The lavish grant—which will be doled out over five years—was awarded as part of a competition among 14 states that resulted in Florida as the only other winner.<sup>4</sup>

A recent posting to the *Huffington Post Blog*<sup>5</sup> (July 26, 2011), reinforces the failure of NCLB:

In order to make ‘adequate yearly progress’ (AYP) under the law, schools must satisfy ever-increasing performance targets set by states. AYP measures the percentage of students making certain target scores on standardized tests in reading and math and graduation rates—regardless of students’ growth. For example, if a student grows two grade levels during a school year but is still below the NCLB-set bar, his scores count against the school’s AYP rating.

Under NCLB, schools that fail to make AYP for two years in a row in the same category, such as graduation rate, are deemed “Needs Improvement.” These schools face consequences, such as requiring supplemental education or giving students the option to transfer into another AYP-making public school or charter school. Schools that fail to make AYP for longer periods of time can face restructuring interventions that involve staff turnover.

Built into NCLB is the requirement that all students be proficient across subjects by 2014, a goal that has universally been called utopian. Because Congress has failed to address the law since it came up for reauthorization in 2007, its mandated targets have continued to increase, creating a slow-moving time bomb for schools. This March, Duncan projected that 82 percent of schools would be deemed as failing by next year.

Yet Ravitch also argues that there is no evidence that the measures demanded actually serve students’ needs and genuinely raise learning and achievement levels, with some schools closing down and then reopening with a different faculty and student intake. One report (*The Proficiency*

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/feds\\_will\\_boost\\_ny\\_charters\\_m9zIWZLSZjs3yykwa1UujN#ixzz1TEQxcMkR](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/feds_will_boost_ny_charters_m9zIWZLSZjs3yykwa1UujN#ixzz1TEQxcMkR)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/26/no-child-left-behind-failing-schools\\_n\\_910067.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/26/no-child-left-behind-failing-schools_n_910067.html)

*Illusion*) on state's testing instruments found the definition of proficiency "varies from state to state, with 'passing scores' ranging from the 6th percentile to the 77th."

Subjects other than reading and math had reduced time allocation, and more activities in reading and math instruction were linked to test-taking preparation and skills. One study (Center on Educational Policy) estimated that 62% of US school districts had increased math and reading instruction time in elementary schools, with 44% reporting less time for Science, Social Studies and the Arts.

With states setting their own tests and proficiency levels, the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) offered some standardized data on test scores across states. Gains on NAEP for the first four years after NCLB was introduced were "modest or non-existent" and often less than before NCLB. Ravitch concludes:

Although NCLB was surrounded with a great deal of high-flown rhetoric when it was passed, promising a new era of high standards and high accomplishment, an era when 'no child would be left behind', the reality was far different. Its remedies did not work. Its sanctions were ineffective. It did not bring about high standards or high accomplishment. The gains in test scores at the state level were typically the result of teaching children test-taking skills and strategies, rather than broadening and deepening their knowledge of the world and their ability to understand what they have learned. (p. 110)

### **3. The "Choice" issue**

Recent educational changes illustrate that choice in education was often limited: choice in theory is available to all but in practice to few; usually only more privileged people could make choices in education systems.

In the US, "choice" was often a euphemism; in the 1950s and '60s, it was used for those whites who did not want to attend desegregated schools. But in 1955, the libertarian and subsequent Nobel prize-winner Milton Friedman wrote *The role of government in education*. Friedman argued that governments should fund but not run schools, in order to maximize individual and family freedom. While Friedman proposed a voucher system, Ravitch argues that the impact of choice proponents was limited until Reagan became President in 1980, when he supported vouchers, finding support from free-market organizations but opposition from a Democrat-controlled Congress. With opposition in Congress and losses in various statewide votes, school choice options gained in numbers while vouchers lost ground. However, the legality of vouchers was sustained in a Wisconsin court challenge in 1998, and Milwaukee voucher numbers rose from 2,000 in 1998 to 20,000 in 2008. The US Supreme Court gave a green light to vouchers that included religious schools in 2002.

Ravitch's case that the concept of vouchers was to some extent replaced with charters may have been accurate at the time of writing but there appears to be evidence that the push for vouchers is making something of a comeback. Republican governors have introduced voucher legislation in a number of states in the first three months of 2011, as reported in an April edition of *Education Week*:

At least 51 different pieces of legislation offering some type of mechanism for providing public funding for private education services have emerged in 35 states

this year, according to the Foundation for Educational Choice, an Indianapolis organization that supports vouchers.<sup>6</sup>

But just as the constraints to vouchers were now removed, another “choice” option was emerging: charter schools—public schools under private management. Albert Shanker (president of the American Federation of Teachers) had, in 1988, supported one form of charter schools in which teachers were able to operate a school within a regular school to deal with students-at-risk. While he withdrew his support for charter schools in 1993, Ravitch states that Shanker’s name was frequently invoked as a “founding father” of charter schools. Charters were initially popular with both liberals (to stop vouchers) and conservatives (to deregulate public schools). By 2001, there were 2,300 charter schools; by 2009, there were approximately 4,600, mostly in urban school districts where academic achievement was lowest. Their proponents argued that the market model would transform American students’ achievement.

Ravitch suggests that some charter schools are excellent, some dreadful, and most somewhere in-between. She also states that the research evidence has been mixed and hotly contested. Ravitch identifies a substantial number of high-profile studies that show minimal or no differences in student achievement between charter and non-charter public schools. Yet Obama continued the support for charter schools by advising states they would be ineligible for \$5 billion in funding unless they removed limits to the expansion of charter schools.

In terms of “choice” and charters, Ravitch concludes:

The question for the future is whether the continued growth of charter schools in urban districts will leave regular public schools with the most difficult students to educate, thus creating a two-tier system of widening inequality. If so, we can safely predict that future studies will ‘prove’ the success of charter schools and the failure of regular schools, because the public schools will have a disproportionate number of less motivated parents and needier students. As charter schools increase in number and able students enroll in them, the regular public schools in the nation’s cities will be locked into a downward trajectory. This would be an ominous development for public education and for our nation. (p. 145).

#### **4. The trouble with accountability**

With an increasing connection between tests and accountability, Ravitch argues that standardized tests are subject to technical problems, as well as being prone to design error and human error. They also have margins of error, and some students are likely to pass a test one day while failing it another. If the test is high-stakes, with possibilities that teachers may be fired or schools close, it becomes more likely not only that most teachers will “teach to the test,” but that some teachers, schools, and districts will cheat and change some answers before test papers are handed in for scoring. Ironically, one of the districts praised by Ravitch (Atlanta) has recently faced a major scandal when mass changes to test papers were discovered. The superintendent who received the American Association of School Administrators “Administrator of the Year” Award

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/04/27/29vouchers\\_ep.h30.html?tkn=SLNFZJufE%2FJunEuPg2DPNCXQJtqxVUGJZp2o&cmp=clp-sb-ascd](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/04/27/29vouchers_ep.h30.html?tkn=SLNFZJufE%2FJunEuPg2DPNCXQJtqxVUGJZp2o&cmp=clp-sb-ascd)



in 2008 has recently retired “under a cloud of suspicion from allegations of widespread cheating”<sup>7</sup>.

In some cases, schools discouraged low-scoring students from taking tests in order to raise the school’s scores, and as choice through charters becomes more common, some charters exclude those students most difficult to educate and likely to score low on standardized texts. In some cases, states lower passing scores to provide the illusion of improvement. Because of the lowering of passing scores, many claims of high gains and improved test scores have been proven to be false, with New York State claiming a jump in proficiency from 65.8% to 86.5%, while at the same time lowering the proficiency passing score from 59.6% to 44%. Gains are often illusory when students are coached to pass a particular test. David Koretz, a Harvard psychometrician, retested students in a district showing impressive test score gains. While testing the same skills but with a different instrument, the gains disappeared, showing that it was familiarity with the test through coaching rather than real gains that was the cause of the “improvement.”

Ravitch also considers how state test scores differ from federal scores of the same students. While states are allowed to set their own assessments and set proficiency levels under NCLB legislation, the federal National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) sets uniform tests across states. With states required by NCLB to report gains, many did—using their own instruments and proficiency levels. Texas reported that 85.1% of its Grade 4 and 8 students were proficient readers, but when the same students were tested under the federal NAEP, only 28.6% were reported as proficient.

She also argues that accountability by test scores removes any responsibility from students and parents, thereby ignoring other factors that may influence attitudes to learning and to tests. Ravitch suggests that accountability measures are too narrow and too punitive, and while “positive accountability” is necessary, punitive accountability is not improving education. With positive accountability, low test scores might trigger additional supports, while in punitive accountability, teachers may be fired. She states:

The goal of accountability should be to support and improve schools, not the heedless destruction of careers, reputations, lives, communities and institutions.  
(p. 165)

Tests are necessary and helpful. But tests must be supplemented by human judgment. When we define what matters in education only by what we can measure, we are in serious trouble. When that happens, we tend to forget that schools are responsible for shaping character, developing sound minds in healthy bodies, and forming citizens for our democracy, not just for teaching basic skills. We even forget to reflect on what we mean when we speak of a good education. Surely we have more in mind than just bare literacy and numeracy. And when we use the results of tests, with all their limitations, as a routine means to fire educators, hand out bonuses, and close schools, then we distort the purpose of schooling altogether. (p. 166–167)

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<sup>7</sup> <http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/politics-raising-children/2011/jul/7/atlantas-cheating-ways-school-officials-test-score/>

## 5. Ravitch's perspective on teacher unions

Ravitch is empathic towards teacher unions. She argues that historically many women joined teacher unions in the 1920s to counter the predominantly male and paternalistic attitudes of supervisors and boards. She also suggests that teachers have traditionally been underpaid and work in conditions which have frequently been problematic in terms of facilities and resources to support students' learning—both areas addressed by teacher unions.

She is critical of arguments that identify teacher unions as a major obstacle to improvements and reform and supports “the right to organize and bargain collectively for their compensation, working conditions, and right to due process” (p. 176). Such “due process” is currently under attack in jurisdictions where teachers are fired for a range of reasons, some linked to student outcomes measured in tests. Tenure, she says, is not a guarantee of lifetime employment but a protection against being terminated without due process. She also argues that many early-career teachers opt out of the profession, so that to some extent the concept of the “immovable” teacher is refuted by the process of attrition where many leave teaching. Almost all the “reformers” pushing for market-based, data-driven reforms are hostile to teacher unions, and have been active in attacking them. As NCLB legislation demanded higher test scores, a range of studies identified teachers as the most crucial factor affecting test scores, with the unfortunate effect that teachers were so linked as to make them totally responsible for success or failure in test scores, and if they “failed,” then some reformers wanted such teachers fired. If the teacher unions formed an obstacle to this thinking, then they were also attacked. Further attacks on teacher unions came from the launching of “Teach for America” (TFA), which, in 2010 had a budget of \$176 million and almost 4,500 incoming recruits<sup>8</sup>. The problem with TFA, suggests Ravitch, is that most studies show that most TFA recruits leave teaching after 2 or 3 years, so that their experience is lost to the system after that time. For teacher unions, TFA recruits represented another downgrading of the teaching profession, with TFA teachers having minimal training and limited longevity in teaching. In some cases, unions reported teachers being laid off and replaced with TFA recruits. Unsurprisingly, some familiar corporate faces are funding Teach for America, including the Walton Family Foundation with contributions over \$50 million<sup>9</sup>. The Walton Foundation announced a new \$49.5 million donation to Teach for America on July 27, 2011<sup>10</sup>. This grant will enable Teach for America to double in size within three years.

## 6. The “Billionaire Boys’ Club”

In this chapter, Ravitch traces the evolution of foundation funding and how such funding has shifted from supporting innovation to potentially directing the course of educational change. She states:

Foundations exist to enable extremely wealthy people to shelter a portion of their capital from taxation, and then to use their money for socially beneficial purposes.  
(p. 197)

Starting with the controversy over a Ford Foundation grant in 1968 in New York, which divided communities and acted as a warning to other foundations, Ravitch skips to 1993 with the Annenberg Foundation grant of \$500 million to support small learning communities as PD for teachers, among a range of generally-supportive strategies. She argues that the Annenberg grant

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<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach\\_For\\_America](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach_For_America)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/donors/>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/27/walton-foundation-teach-for-america-walmart\\_n\\_910615.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/27/walton-foundation-teach-for-america-walmart_n_910615.html)

marked the end of “hands-off” philanthropy and, around the turn of the century, the start of planned and controlling foundation funding to systematically change schools in line with foundations’ philosophies;

The new titans of the foundation world were billionaire entrepreneurs and corporate leaders. ...Unlike the older established foundations, such as Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie, the new foundations knew what they wanted to accomplish, how they wanted to accomplish it, and which organizations were the appropriate recipients of their largesse. (p. 199).

These new foundations included Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton family, who came to be known as “venture philanthropists,” with their investments referred to as “philanthrocapitalism” because “it borrows concepts from venture capital finance and business management” (p. 199–200).

It was these foundations that Ravitch calls the Billionaire’s Boys’ Club, which she states exercised enormous influence because of massive amounts of money strategically invested, coinciding with declining federal and state investment in US public schools. Yet they were not elected bodies, and had no mandate to influence policy:

There is something fundamentally antidemocratic about relinquishing control of the public education policy agenda to private foundations run by society’s wealthiest people; when the wealthiest of these Foundations are joined in common purpose, they represent an unusually powerful force that is beyond the reach of democratic institutions. These Foundations, no matter how worthy and high-minded, are after all, not public agencies. They are not subject to public oversight or review, as a public agency would be. They have taken it upon themselves to reform public education, perhaps in ways that would never survive the scrutiny of voters in any district or state. If the voters don’t like the foundations’ reform agenda, they can’t vote them out of office. The foundations demand that public schools and teachers be made accountable for performance, but they themselves are accountable to no one. If their plans fail, no sanctions are levied against them. They are bastions of unaccountable power. (p. 322)

As of 2009, the Gates Foundation’s assets were \$33,912,320,600<sup>11</sup>. Yes, that is almost \$34 **billion** dollars, an amount Warren Buffet has promised to (approximately) double<sup>12</sup>. The Gates Foundation is already three times as large as the second-biggest foundation in America, and wields immense power and influence. Doubling its assets to approximately \$68 billion would substantially increase its already major levels of power and control. In 2009, the Walton Foundation’s assets were \$2,275,851,898. The Broad Foundation website<sup>13</sup> reports current foundation assets of \$2.1 billion.

Ravitch also claims that these foundations are given a soft ride in the media, with few critical questions or analyses. In addition, few other critics speak from within education systems in case foundation funding is withdrawn.

In some cases the philosophies espoused by the “big three” foundations active in K–12 education in the US (Gates, Walton, and Broad) are overtly market-driven, with support for vouchers and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/topfunders/top100assets.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/pages/implementing-warren-buffetts-gift.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.broadfoundation.org/about\\_broads.html](http://www.broadfoundation.org/about_broads.html)

charter schools. The Broad Foundation's grants reflect a strong corporate ethos of "competition, choice, deregulation and tight management" (p. 212), with Broad supporting some of the New York and San Diego "reforms" described earlier in this paper, and pumping money into Oakland School after the state of California fired and did not replace the elected board which had an accumulated debt of \$100 million. In another instance, the Gates Foundation was convinced that small high schools were one key answer to American education problems, and Gates pumped huge amounts of money (\$100 million in New York alone) into creating and supporting small high schools, yet there was little research to support small schools as a key component of reform. After spending \$2 billion with no evidence of success, the foundation switched course in 2008 and enthusiastically began supporting performance pay for teachers and increased support for charter schools.

The cohesion among the foundations suggests an ideological approach, alongside an unwillingness to consider research that does not match the ideology. Ravitch states:

Given the dubious research on which his (Gates) foundation invested nearly \$2 billion in small schools, one can only hope that he examines the extensive research that challenges his views on teacher effectiveness. He might also ask himself whether schools focused only on standardized tests of basic skills will produce the high achievement and creative thinking that he values and that are necessary to maintain the nation's innovative edge and its productivity in the future. (p. 219–220)

Ravitch's key argument is that business solutions and market-thinking are not the answers to issues in public education. Neighbourhood schools, she argues, are important community assets and should not be treated like consumer items. Schools are not market places and going to school is different to going shopping—while we can shop for a good product, every neighbourhood deserves a good school. By subverting the concept of public education with market philosophies, the foundations are playing a role in the destruction of public schooling and the emergence of private school provision, whereas Ravitch argues for a mix of public and private, using examples of Catholic schools (rapidly declining in part because of the pressure from charter schools) as a positive influence in educating poor and minority communities.

She summarizes her ideas of why foundations' market-driven beliefs, and many current political approaches, are wrong for public education by stating:

The market undermines traditional values and traditional ties; it undermines morals, which rest on community consensus. If there is no community consensus, then one person's sense of morals is as good as the next, and neither takes precedence. This may be great for the entertainment industry, but it is not healthy for children, who need to grow up surrounded by the mores and values of their community. As consumers, we should be free to choose. As citizens, we should have connections to the place we live and be prepared to work together with our neighbours on common problems. When neighbours have no common meeting ground, it is difficult for them to organize on behalf of their self-interest and their community.

With so much money and so much power aligned against the neighbourhood school and against education as a profession, public education itself is placed at risk. The strategies now favoured by the most powerful forces in the private and public sectors are unlikely to improve American education. Deregulation

contributed to the near collapse of our national economy in 2008, and there is no reason to anticipate that it will make education better for more children.

Removing public oversight will leave the education of our children to the whim of entrepreneurs and financiers. Nor is it wise to entrust our schools to inexperienced teachers, principals, and superintendents. Education is too important to relinquish to the vagaries of the market and the good intention of amateurs.

American education has a long history of infatuation with fads and ill-conceived ideas. The current obsession with making our schools work like a business may be the worst of them, for it threatens to destroy public education. Who will stand up to the tycoons and politicians and tell them so? (p. 222)

## Conclusion

Ravitch has become a popular speaker and presenter since her emergence as a critic of the Bush, Clinton, and Obama regimes' policies. Her articulate and evidence-based critiques of the imposed reforms in districts like New York and San Diego, with their fixation on narrowly-focused test scores as measures of school and system success, has exposed major flaws in the "reform" movement. Some such flaws are even more dramatic than Ravitch reported or was aware of, with the subsequent news of Atlanta's massive cheating on tests. Her analysis of the Billionaire Boys' Club makes a strong case that unelected and powerful interests are not only exerting a greater influence on the US education system, but they are to some extent acting cohesively to reflect an ideological and market-based approach. While there have been some responses to Ravitch's arguments, there has been a surprisingly low level of discourse about the issues she raises. Are test scores of a few subjects appropriate in terms of their impact on pedagogy and their use to measure teacher, school, and system success? Should mayors control education systems? Should elected school boards be fired or emasculated? Why did the media give Bill Gates a free ride when he abandoned his small-school initiative, all but admitting failure? How does he get to select the next topic into which he will pump billions of dollars to influence educational agendas? Why do the American reforms tend to ignore the evidence of success in countries like Finland and pursue avenues unlikely to improve student learning?

Ravitch's manuscript was rejected by 15 publishers<sup>14</sup> before Basic Books took the plunge; since then it has become a best-seller. This extraordinary level of rejection may have been purely market-based (in which case the 15 rejecting publishing houses all made a major miscalculation), or it may reflect an unwillingness to be associated with a platform critical of current and previous presidents, the denizens of foundations like Gates and Walton, and the mayors and administrators whose efforts generate minimal media critiques while exerting considerable power and control in American society. While this is pure conjecture, it appears curious that a widely-published and respected author suddenly had difficulty finding a publisher when her focus and critique was the rich, the right, and the powerful. Perhaps a coincidence, perhaps not.

A second reason for the lack of serious discourse may be the culture of the US and its current political polarization. With its arguably greater focus on individualism than community, the US may be more open to the concept of a dominant "hero" fixing systems by strong individualistic and hierarchical leadership and management than it is open to more collective and consensual approaches to education and schooling. The culture of individual leadership in education has been a popular theme in American movies, where one (usually male) figure changes lives and

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/41083/diane-ravitch-the-anti-rhee/full/>

systems. While many films like *Stand and deliver*<sup>15</sup> have inspirational ideas and honour the work of educators like Jaime Escalante, they also reflect the individualism favoured by Hollywood, and perhaps reflective of American mores. And accounts about the patient, painstaking work of teachers collectively addressing concerns hardly make riveting stories for film-makers or newspaper publishers.

There is also a widespread belief that the US education system is seriously flawed, and that reforms and change are necessary. Yet the analysis of the flaws tends to create a selective culture of blame in that teachers and teacher unions are attacked with vigour (and often with vitriol) while funding inadequacies, obsession with test scores, and the frequent failures of foundations' initiatives are ignored. That many "reforms" have fundamentally failed to change much except to create pervasive cultures of negative and stultifying pedagogy (teaching to the test) and systemic cheating appears to be of little concern to those reformers who want to fire teachers, close schools, and expand privatization through charters and voucher systems.

The culture of attack and polarization has also reached new heights in the US, reflected in part by the growth of the "Tea Party," and is evident in the numerous attacks on American unions in states like Wisconsin, where the goal appears to be to destroy public-sector unions' capacity to function while attacking public sectors' pay, benefits, and pensions under the guise of fiscal constraint. The Tea Party proclaims three core values that have emerged in a Democratic presidency, but which apparently were not needed under successive Republican regimes which contributed to building the massive debt level and imposed the deregulation which have between them contributed to the fiscal and economic meltdown in the US:

- Contrary to Republican rhetoric, it is the Republicans under George Bush who brought the nation into unsafe debt territory during one of the most significant economic booms of our lifetimes. George Bush entered the White House inheriting a budget surplus and a manageable debt burden. As economist Menzie Chinn has shown, when Bush took office he inherited a public debt-to-GDP ratio at just 34%. But Bush forced through tax cuts for the rich and increased spending on a war that no other country would pay for—and increased the debt ratio by 17 percentage points to a concerning 51%.<sup>16</sup>
- Since 1940, the debt ceiling limit has been raised 106 times:
  - Under President George W. Bush, the debt ceiling was raised seven times between 2001 and 2009, adding \$4 trillion to the federal deficit.
  - Under President Reagan, the ceiling was raised 18 times between 1981 and 1988.<sup>17</sup>

While many Americans on the right of the political spectrum appear to have short and somewhat selective memories, the Tea Party "values" of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally-limited government, and free markets<sup>18</sup> have struck a populist chord in an environment of unemployment, foreclosure, and disillusion, and are evident in influencing an environment in which many educational "reforms" are underway or proposed in the US.

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<sup>15</sup> *Stand and deliver*, dir. by Ramón Menéndez (1988; Warner Bros. Pictures, USA).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/jul/28/debt-ceiling-republicans>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jul/27/us-debt-crisis-john-boehner-barack-obama-republicans-democrats?intcmp=239>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.teapartypatriots.org/mission.aspx>

Ravitch is a counter not only to the thinking of the far right but also to the Obama administration, to the mayoral rule of education systems in cities like New York, and to the foundations which support market approaches to education. Her ideas deserve a greater level of consideration and discourse than they appear to be generating. Yet her tireless level of speaking engagements and communications are serving to provide one base for many who are witnessing what they believe to be disquieting change. Her articulation of ideas, her examples and evidence, provide a rich source of information, evidence, and inspiration to consider what changes may be needed to improve and build an education system to meet the needs of students, parents, communities, and the economy. It's well worth the read, and it may well generate a more substantive discourse than has been the case to date.