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Review: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* by Diane Ravitch

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**The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education** by Diane Ravitch.  
New York: Basic Books, 2010. 283 pp. ISBN 978-0465014910.

In the opening chapter of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch explains the sequence of events that led to her change of heart about the best road to success for public education in the United States. Ravitch spent the early 1990s working in the Republican administration as the Assistant Secretary of Education, supporting the choice and accountability movements. Two decades later, she is an adamant critic of those same movements. After critically reviewing years of her writing, she felt the need to explain why she “had returned to [her] roots as a partisan of American education” (p. 13). In doing so, Ravitch lays out a well-informed history of how the United States has arrived at its high-stakes testing state of education, organizing a strong argument about how the country has lost sight of the democratic function of public education, as well as how essential a strong curriculum is to the success of our nation’s schools. Ravitch presents a compelling case that the “public” is slowly eroding from public education across America. Particularly, the democratic voices of parents and communities are heard less and less as the districts and philanthropies collude in pushing for higher test scores, with an “at all costs” attitude.

In her assessment of federal education legislation, particularly No Child Left Behind, Ravitch argues that the high-stakes testing environment drives everything taught in the classroom to the detriment of the students. In the end, Ravitch believes that we are left with measurements of how well students can take multiple-choice tests rather than what they actually learn. Equally as concerning, since most states only cover English, mathematics, and occasionally science, nation-wide budget cuts to the curriculum are focused on arts, physical education, and foreign languages. However, Ravitch’s argument is unclear, leaving two options outlined in undesirable terms. The reader is left to consider the problem of creating a national set of standards that are far too liberal (identified as problematic when considering race, class, and gender), while dismissing scripted curriculum that allows little room for imagination and creativity. Herein lies the largest flaw in the book: she spends chapter after chapter explaining where the U.S. has gone wrong in education—which has led, apparently, to the “Death” of the Great American School System—but spends little time on possible solutions. Such is the case as she connects the Balanced Literacy movement in New York’s District 2 to the ostracizing of parents in discussions at the schools.

It is not surprising that Ravitch focuses much of the book on New York, considering her work at Columbia and her appointment at New York University. Ravitch points out the opposition to District 2 Superintendent Tony Alvarado’s

implementation of the Balanced Literacy program, as well as many of Mayor Bloomberg's top-down decisions (including the expansion of Balanced Literacy to every school in the city). With little data to back the program, Balanced Literacy was mandated in every school across the district, touted as an all-encompassing curriculum, despite the expressed collective wishes of parents and teachers. Through interviews with those stakeholders, Ravitch captures the feeling of powerlessness and futility parents and teachers felt. To her credit, she does expand her geographic exploration of these issues by including Alvarado's move to San Diego, where he took over as superintendent of public schools, based on the "success" of the Balanced Literacy movement in New York. In retrospect, Ravitch points out that the Balanced Literacy curriculum was not the explanation for the rising scores across District 2. Instead, the results were likely from the rapidly changing demographics of District 2's schools, where "nearly 90 percent of the new enrollment in District 2 consisted of white and Asian students ... groups that tend to score higher" on standardized exams (p. 44). Further, in terms of centralizing control and silencing community members, Bloomberg transferred the Board of Education from elected officials to mayoral appointees, "renamed it the Panel for Educational Policy and made clear that he considered it of no importance" (p. 70). This move, she points out, allowed Bloomberg to have full control, to keep any dissent removed from the sphere of influence.

The philanthropic organizations included in Ravitch's "Billionaire Boys Club"—the Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Broad Foundation—are revealed to have held more influence over educational decisions over the past 10 years than perhaps any other players. Most disturbing is Ravitch's claim that these players have moved from funding organizations that do the work to doing the work themselves, even without the necessary background knowledge or research. In doing so, she argues, they have shown no loyalties to neighborhood schools, instead backing the free-market approach to education, using Gates' small high school movement as an example. After spending \$2 billion dollars to create multiple small high schools within the same building that the larger high school once resided, the evidence showed little positive effect. Within the same account, Broad seemed equally uninterested in community support, backing an Oakland superintendent who removed the locally elected board to ensure "there was no board to slow or block the rapid imposition of reforms favored by the foundation" (p. 213). This paved the way for more charter schools to pop up in Oakland, a movement that also concerns Ravitch when discussing the democratic ideals of education.

Ravitch takes a considerable amount of time to address the myth that the charter schools' curricula are somehow stronger than neighborhood schools. While the data do not allow for a clear-cut answer, it is clear that, like neighborhood schools, there are some excellent charter schools and some sub-par

ones. In surveying the charter school movement, Ravitch is encouraged by the small sample of schools that are succeeding in the academic arena, but points out that even those schools are eroding public education. By competing for the top students in a district, and aiming at those parents who are motivated to investigate options for their children and sign the application, these charters leave public schools as warehouses for low-performing students. Looking to the future of this movement, the question, according to Ravitch, “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” (p. 145).

Considering Ravitch’s history of political ideology, questions have been raised about whether this book is a true “*mea culpa*” or an attempt to keep her name in the forefront of discussions about education in this country. Readers will have to come to that decision for themselves when considering her arguments in this book. However, the overwhelming concern is the lack of solutions to so many problems Ravitch poses.

While Ravitch covers the landscape of issues thoroughly, she offers few solutions to the problems she has posed. Some are not only worth considering, but have been shouted from the rooftops in the field of education (“Nor should test scores be the sole measure of the quality of a school,” p. 238), others hearken back to Ravitch’s conservative roots with frightening results (“Schools must enforce standards of civility,” p. 241).

It is on the latter note that Ravitch misses the point in the national conversations. Throughout the book, she recognizes that schools have historically failed students and families, particularly in low-income minority communities; however, she still expects that these students act as obedient children, following the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) model to “sit up straight; dress neatly; look at the teacher; shake hands firmly; don’t speak out” (p. 240). It is this focus on these peripheral issues that keep us from addressing the real problems facing schools today. Many argue that to say that a student can only learn if he or she is dressed neatly, is naive and, to the student, insulting and judgmental. Further, why should a student sit up straight and keep silent as the school spirals further into failure? Ravitch is correct when she describes the public education system as “a fundamental element of our democratic society” (p. 391). In that sense, wouldn’t she want students to voice their fundamental right to demand a better education from their school? This is a discussion worthy of a nationally recognized book such as Ravitch’s, yet she relies on supporting obedience in students instead of addressing the necessary messiness of democracy.

## **Reviewer**

Scott Cody is a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania whose interest is in the intersection of health, communities, and schools. In particular, he is investigating how community schools can act as a hub to provide social services, especially in mental health, for students and community members. Prior to arriving at Penn, Scott received his Ed.M. at Harvard, consulted as a Literacy Coach for Los Angeles Education Partnership, and taught middle school for six years.