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What Would Diane Do?



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Diane Ravitch is an inspired writer, one of the few education analysts with a historical perspective, and a professional skeptic and contrarian. These admirable traits are in short supply these days but in full display in her new book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

The basic story line is predictable for anyone who has been reading Ravitch in recent years. After earlier embracing school choice, accountability, and testing, Ravitch has had a late-life conversion and now expresses views on these issues that largely line up with the American Federation of Teachers party line.

Ravitch is one of the most prolific writers on education - writing scores of columns, participating in several education blogs, and even penning the occasionally tart tweet ("Is Arne Duncan really Margaret Spellings in drag?") - but her forte is her full-length books. Here, Ravitch has the space to fully develop her arguments, include much-needed nuance, and respond to critics at length.

In her new book, Ravitch explains her change of heart, but it's not a complete u-turn on every issue. Ravitch remains the nation's most articulate critic (since the death of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in 2007) of political correctness, multiculturalism, and campus intolerance for free speech. Ravitch also continues to make an eloquent case for a classical liberal-arts education and to warn of the dangers of dumbed-down state tests and a narrowing of the curriculum.

Yet, Ravitch's new book reveals a few blind spots.

First, Ravitch has become an uncritical defender of teachers unions. One need not be an anti-union, Wal-Mart loving, right-winger to realize that union contracts across the country are an impediment to learning. Ravitch's close friend, Sol Stern, has written persuasively about the archaic elements of the New York City teachers contract, for example. But, nowhere in her book does Ravitch say a single negative word about the impact of union contractual provisions on the ability to turnaround urban school systems.

Second, Ravitch, who should know better, offers an overly romanticized view of neighborhood schools, as if a neighborhood school in Park Slope is indistinguishable from a neighborhood school in East New York or Harlem.

Third, Ravitch's current views on charter schools have become needlessly ideological. I share Ravitch's impatience with charter advocates who espouse a libertarian "let a thousand flowers bloom" view of charter authorizing, not caring enough about the many weeds that have sprung up. But, at the same time, Ravitch gives short shrift to the many top urban schools that exist only because charter-school laws allowed their creation without the consent of the districts in which she places her hopes. These charter schools also have served the progressive goal of proving that every child can learn no matter their neighborhood, race, or economic background.

Fourth, Ravitch's laser-like demand for research-based evidence is deployed unevenly. For issues she opposes - mayoral control and charter schools, for example -- she demands irrefutable proof of their effectiveness and clearly delights when she finds a negative nugget in a critical study. But, for things she supports - teacher unions, small classes, and more public input -- she offers and seeks no evidence that they have a positive impact on educational outcomes however measured.

Ravitch's selectivity was shown when she responded to three charter studies in a row in the past year. When Margaret (Macke) Raymond of Stanford issued a study showing many charter schools were not performing so well, Ravitch uncritically highlighted the findings. When Caroline Hoxby found stronger charter results specifically in New York City, Ravitch scoured the report to find methodological issues to jump on. And, then, when Raymond did a study that showed NYC's charters performed much better than her national sample, Ravitch picked apart the results, an impulse she didn't have when Raymond's earlier national study lined up with her anti-charter position. These are the actions of a polemicist not an objective academic.

Fifth, Ravitch too often caricatures the arguments of her opponents. So, we get: "There are no grounds for the claim made in the past decade that accountability all by itself is a silver bullet, nor for the oft-asserted argument that choice by itself is a panacea" (emphasis added). Ravitch could have dueled with her opponents without overstating their arguments or trotting out the overused foils "panacea" and "silver bullet."

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Ravitch offers only the broadest outlines of what she favors. Her details are saved for her criticisms. This is perhaps my biggest disappointment with her book. I agree that we need "an excellent curriculum, appropriate assessments, and well-educated teachers." I also agree that parents should be more involved, and we should expect civility and also value intellectual diversity.

The challenge, however, for operating a public school system - and the title of her book suggests she wants to restore "the great American school system" - is making operational such broad sentiments.

Ravitch's book is light on these details - more a list of don'ts than a list of dos.

While reading her chapter on "lessons learned," I couldn't help but wonder what specifically Ravitch would do if she was appointed New York City Schools Chancellor.

A few questions for starters: Would she keep the UFT contract in New York City? If not, what would she change? Does she think the length of school day and year should be changed? To what? What if

the UFT objected? She opposes merit pay, but does she really think good teachers and mediocre teachers should be paid the same just because they have been around the same amount of time and have accumulated the same number of teacher credits? Would she expand the number of charter schools or impose a moratorium? Would she eliminate the cap on any high-performing charter schools? Since she praises Catholic schools, would she favor an education tax credit proposal that actually would allow them to be viable economically? Does she think Congressional Democrats did a favor for poor parents when they killed off the D.C. scholarship program? Regarding the state's testing program that she critiques, would she "end it or mend it"? How?

In the end, I come away from Ravitch's book with joy for the quality of her writing, a better understanding of her views, an occasional (o.k., frequent) spike in my blood pressure, and a yearning for Ravitch to think more deeply about implementable alternatives to the approaches she critiques.

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