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Book Review: The Schools We Deserve

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Reflections on the Educational

The Schools We Deserve:

Reflections on the Educational

Crises of our Time

by Diane Ravitch


It would be difficult to find a
sustained period of time in
our history when Americans
felt satisfied with the achievements of
their schools." This sweeping obser-
vation begins the first in a collection of
some twenty essays on the varied prob-
lems facing American education today.
Specifically, Diane Ravitch cites the
"low state of learning," "poor training
of teachers," "insufficient funding"
and "apathy of the public" among the
more common issues confronting our
nation's educational efforts, both
public and private.

The essays in The Schools We Deserve
were written over the past decade, the
majority of them since 1981. The
author's style is objective, reasoned
and above all, balanced - far removed
from the emotional tone of so many
critics of contemporary educational
policy. Her writing projects a sense of
detached investigation and considered
thought; note, for example, the care
with which she presents the controver-
sial issue of testing and test usage in the
schools.

Ravitch identifies her basic theme as
follows: educational outcomes are not
inevitable; they are not the result of
forces beyond our control. Rather,
educational outcomes are a direct func-
tion of our assumptions, ideals and
policies. Given this context of our own
responsibility for our own actions, she
goes on to ask some probing, and
possibly upsetting, questions: How
strong is our commitment to educa-
tion? Do we really provide equal educa-
tional opportunity for all? Are we truly
concerned about offering a broad range
of academic disciplines through the
high school years? Are we willing to
pay the price of attracting and re-
warding highly qualified teachers.

One is struck by the wide range of
problems associated with schooling
and how it might be improved. Perhaps
this lengthy list of weaknesses and
shortcomings is, in fact, part of the
problem. The essays deal with a variety
of political, social, economic, cultural,
religious, racial, psychological and
even intellectual issues. This is not to
fault Ravitch for taking on such an
amalgam of concerns - but it does
raise the question of priorities. What is
the legitimate domain of schooling? Is
this domain defined through any logi-
cal process? Or, do these functions be-
come part of a limitless, poorly-
defined body of concerns? Comforting
though it would be, the schools are not
about to fix everything in society that is
in need of fixing.

The author's tone is, at times, more
positive than the title of the book
would seem to indicate. American schools
are not without their successes. She
cites teacher training, unions, in-
creased enrollments because of in-
creased opportunity, and federal aid
among the accomplishments of recent
decades. Unfortunately, these un-
doubtedly have not eliminated problems
but have only served to move them
forward to a new age and a new set of
critics. Today's critics, she maintains,
are not likely to dwell upon yesterday's
victories. The school is continually
faced with new demands, new expecta-
tions and new hopes. In 1940, 16% of
our youth attended college. This figure
had climbed to 75% in the late 1960's.
The G.I. Bill, Headstart and other
support programs brought about the
democratization of education. Educa-
tion, especially higher education, was
no longer the exclusive privilege of the
selected few. However, Ravitch points
out, the high school diploma became
"universal," declining in importance
because "high school graduates were
not necessarily literate." I am re-
minded of the dilemma set forth in the
title of John Gardner's book of 25 years
ago: Excellence - Can We Be Equal and
Excellent Too?

Ravitch devotes one essay to the
matter of teachers and the teaching
profession, and spares nobody, it
would seem, in her criticism of why
teachers are not better qualified to do
their jobs. Government at all levels,
colleges and universities, the press, the
courts, private business - all should
play a role in upgrading the quality of
education. The essay contends, how-
ever, that these various agencies and
institutions lower standards, promote
their own interests, or simply exhibit a
lack of interest in education at the
public school level. It is not sufficient
to blame the schools, or the teachers, in
that they do not exist as a separate
institutions - the school is a product of
the interaction network of many societal
forces.

Our schools, surveying the past half-
century, have "lurched from crisis to
crisis," amidst conflicting views on
"bilingual education, busing, tuition
tax credits, school closings, bond
issues, tax rates, teacher qualifications,
textbook selection and allocation of
resources." Yet, Ravitch contends,
there remains the over-riding belief
that "schools can make a difference in
the lives of our children."

In addressing the issue of reform,
Ravitch turns to past attempts at predic-
tion and innovation. A review of futuris-
tic thought from Dewey to Illich leads
her to the conclusion that projected
innovations of the past 50 years have
fallen far short of the intended goals.
She characterizes today's teacher with
25 years of experience as someone who
has lived through "an era of failed
revolutions."

In sum, this collection of essays
makes no attempt to offer a ready cure
for the future. It should not be dis-
missed, however, as merely another
display of negativism. It is an objective
dissection of problems and issues, and
for that reason alone is of greater value
than the fiery criticism which educa-
tion frequently must endure. Ravitch
tsuggests that, although we have the
ability to improve our schools, we will
continue at much the same level of
performance until such time as we free
ourselves from the "errant assump-
tions" of the present. We are able, she
writes, to bring about change in a small,
immediate arena - our greatest chal-

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