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## Book Review: Our Schools are at Risk

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# BOOK REVIEW

## Our Schools are at Risk

J. Michael Bodi

Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to American Public Schools* (New York: Knopf, 2013).

I first saw Dr. Diane Ravitch give a keynote speech at the University of Houston in the early 1990s while I was working on my doctorate at the University of Texas, Austin. She was then Assistant Secretary in the Department of Education when George H.W. Bush was president. I was immediately put off by the things she had to say. At the time Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, (a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education), were pushing the “new accountability” for public schools. They were the conservative bulwarks arguing that the schools needed to be overhauled, that we had a crisis in our educational system, and we had to measure, collect data, measure some more, shut down schools, and fire teachers and principals as necessary. The republic was being attacked internally. With glossy overheads and rousing pronouncements we, the audience, were harangued and browbeaten for an hour. The crowd rose in adulation. I sat stunned and incredulous at what I had just heard. The hyperbole was not new to me, of course; what was most disconcerting was the audience. They *liked* her.

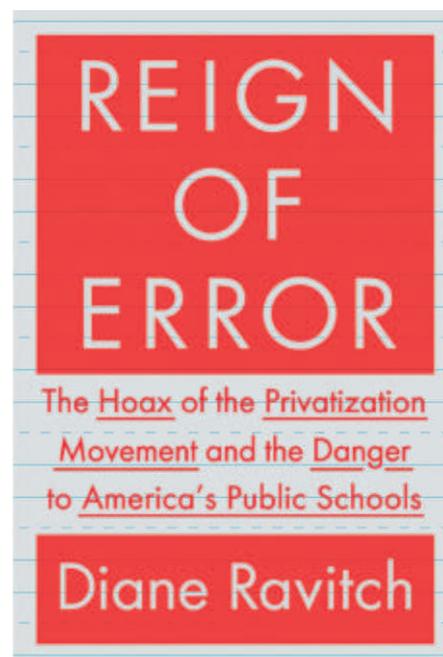
This was a time when everything changed in American public education. In 1965, the first foray into public education by the federal government was the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). Education had never been a federal prerogative, but the ESEA allowed for a constitutional end run. Through ESEA, the feds could offer direct grants to states or school districts in return for compliance with

“national” policies. Gradually, in succeeding decades, having this capacity pushed some policy makers to conceive of national educational standards where students and educators could be held to account. The accountability movement reached full flight in the 1990s and led to *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001, which was essentially a revamping of the ESEA. It had a different name and a radically different approach,

in which the government could intervene in public education throughout the country. The conservatives were in charge and opened the door to the public schools to corporate America.

During the Q&A in Houston, I had managed to grab the microphone to ask Ravitch a straight-forward question: did she feel that mandating standardized testing across the country in K-12 schools would solve the problems she had identified? She hemmed and hawed, but in essence said “yes,” that we had to collect valid and reliable data to determine what our children knew and didn’t know so we could then design curricula to ensure that children would be given the opportunity to “achieve their full potential.” I attempted to ask a follow-up question: how is it possible for anyone to determine if someone else has reached his full potential? But she ignored my query and moved on to another questioner.

Ravitch went on to work for the Clinton administration on national learning assessments for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a program euphemistically referred to as the “nation’s report card.”



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She promoted charter schools and argued that for-profit companies (ones that received public monies) be allowed to run them. And she promoted the notion that student test scores be tied to teacher performance. Her positions in government and academia were platforms for spreading the wildfire that swept through American schools nationwide. And as a consequence, fully two generations of youngsters have been harmed by those actions and outcomes. The bleeding has not been

lamented that educational reform has been taken over by for-profit corporations and correctly observes that test scores have risen evenly and consistently for decades regardless of standardized testing and, likewise, that high school and college graduation rates have steadily increased. Ravitch assails merit pay for teachers as a flawed idea, and even attacks programs (Teach for America) and individuals (Michelle Rhee, former Chancellor of the Washington, DC public schools), and

development. Our children must have time to “sing and dance and draw and play and giggle.”(7) Standardized testing should be used for diagnostic purposes only. “Public education is a basic public responsibility.”(9)

But, in the end, *Reign of Error* merely takes us to a place where other educators and thinkers have been pointing us for some time. Much of what Ravitch discusses in this book has been done before. For example, the plight of our inner-city schools has been painfully described in detail in Jonathan Kozol’s work since the 1970s, most recently in his book *Shame of the Nation: Apartheid in American Public Schools* (2005). The President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randi Weingarten, stated in a January 2014 speech: “It starts with investing in early childhood education, making college affordable, making public schools the center of communities, and, equipping students with essential life skills and offering multiple paths to graduation and the world of work through rigorous career and technical education programs.” In the preface to *Reign of Error*, Ravitch states, “The purpose of elementary and secondary education is to develop the minds and character of young children and adolescents and help them grow up to become healthy, knowledgeable, and competent citizens” (xii).

Finally, we agree.



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## For almost 400 pages in this current book she provides data that refute literally every position held by conservative reformers regarding public education in America.

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stanching and more blood-letting is happening with the advent of the Core Curriculum, a movement to centralize American public schools into one system.

Ironically, in 2010 she changed her mind. “They were wrong,” she stated in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, and recanted her earlier support of the “reform agenda.” Now, in her most recent book, *Reign of Error* (2013), she says there is nothing to reform. High-school graduation rates are at an all-time high, and reading scores for 4<sup>th</sup>-grade white, black, Hispanic and Asian students were significantly higher in 2011 than they were in 1992, as measured by the NAEP. For almost 400 pages in this current book she provides data that refute literally every position held by conservative reformers regarding public education in America. She

Arne Duncan (Secretary of Education for President Obama). She also criticizes President Obama’s “Race to the Top” program, in which states compete for federal dollars, as merely an extension of NCLB (now languishing for want of re-enactment) that further privatizes American education. This, she says, must stop now.

Ravitch discusses at length what should be done to ensure continuous growth and achievement in our K-12 schools. She says we must invest in our schools beginning with children in utero. Regular medical care is vitally important to ensure adequate physical and cognitive development and allow for good pre-kindergarten learning experiences for all our children. From K through 12, children and teenagers should be taught using age-appropriate learning modalities and experiences, paralleling their psychological