The 'Great American School System' Flunks Out

by GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

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A distinguished historian of public schools in the United States, Diane Ravitch isn't easy to categorize politically. She was assistant secretary of education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. Bill Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which supervises national testing. And in The Language Police, Ravitch lambasted educational administrators on the left and right for sacrificing truth, literary quality and disciplinary content in the textbooks they ordered and the exams they authorized.

In The Death and Life of the Great American School System, Ravitch continues to call 'em as she sees 'em, even when she's pillorying policies she's previously praised. Drawing on an avalanche of data, she now argues, passionately and persuasively, that school choice, testing and accountability, the shibboleths everyone in the educational establishment applauds, are actually degrading the intellectual capacity of students.

On average, Ravitch reveals, students in charter schools do not outperform their counterparts in public schools. Charter schools achieving apparently dazzling results often cook the books by accepting few English language learners, students with special education needs, or those with disciplinary problems.

In a withering assault on the No Child Left Behind legislation of President George W. Bush, Ravitch demonstrates that accountability based solely on test scores has been a disaster. By measuring success only in relation to exams in reading and mathematics, and stigmatizing and sanctioning schools that do not make "adequate yearly progress," NCLB provides perverse incentives to "teach to the test" and devote less time to science, social studies, history, geography, foreign languages, art and music. And for administrators to get "breathtaking results" by quietly dumbing-down tests or lowering the "cut score" (passing grade).

The Death and Life of the Great American School System leaves virtually no educational icon unscathed. Despite an impressive and idealistic corps of volunteers, Ravitch cites studies indicating that Teach for America may not improve the quality of education in poor and rural school districts. She breaks a "conspiracy of silence" to indict mega-rich philanthropies, including the Gates, Walton and Broad foundations, for high-jacking the educational agenda — and taking it in the wrong direction.

Ravitch concludes her terrific and timely book with a plea that the best way to enhance education is to rescue the curriculum from the culture wars, set rigorous statewide or national standards for content, and improve the conditions in which teachers work and students learn, rather than "squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled." Millions of minds, after all, are terrible things to waste.

Excerpt: 'The Death and Life of the Great American School System'

by DIANE RAVITCH

"Schools operate fundamentally — or should operate — like families," author Diane Ravitch said in a Morning Edition interview. "The fundamental principle by which education proceeds is collaboration."