Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools, by Diane Ravitch

Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, think tanks, philanthropic foundations and the mass media agree that America's public schools are in crisis. Through two pieces of legislation, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, reformers have promoted (and sometimes mandated) a new regime of common standards, testing, accountability and competition (through the establishment of charter schools and for-profit schools).

According to Diane Ravitch, the reformers are wrong on all counts. Although public schools are underfunded, lack well-trained teachers and need a deeper, more diverse and more rigorous curriculum, she maintains that despite these challenges (and the responsibility of educating a heterogeneous population, including many students whose "first language" is not English), they are actually performing rather well, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (the most authoritative gauge of student achievement over time) and high school graduation rates. Ravitch also claims that the demand for testing, accountability and privatization "is akin to bringing a blowtorch to put out a fire." It does nothing to address the realities of poverty and inequality, "the root causes of poor academic performance." And it has put public education, "an essential institution," responsible for producing a democratic citizenry and providing equality of opportunity, at risk.

Ravitch knows what she's talking about. One of the nation's leading historians of education, she served as assistant secretary of education in George W. Bush's administration. She strongly supported the reform agenda until she saw the destructive impact of No Child Left Behind and recanted in "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" (2010).

Drawing on a substantial amount of research data, Ravitch demonstrates in "Reign of Error" that
NAEP test scores have improved for almost every group of students over the past 20 years, dramatically in mathematics and more modestly in reading. Including GEDs, 90 percent of Americans in the 18- to 24-year-old age cohort have high school diplomas. Contrary to reports of stagnation in college degrees, the percentage of those between 25 and 29 who have completed bachelor's degrees has risen from 22 percent in 1980 to 32 percent in 2011.

"Reign of Error" also presents a devastating critique of teaching to tests, school vouchers, charter schools and for-profit institutions. Superintendent Michelle Rhee's hard-charging, bridge-burning, union-busting tactics in Washington, Ravitch indicates, did not reduce the large performance gap between black and white students; Rhee's pressure to raise passing grades on tests produced early results but has been "dogged by persistent suspicions that she had failed to investigate widespread cheating." A congressionally mandated study, Ravitch notes, found no conclusive evidence that voucher programs, euphemistically called "opportunity scholarships" (because no initiative or referendum supporting vouchers has passed in any state), improved students' performances. Charter schools "run the gamut from excellent to awful," but, on average, are no more successful than public schools. And the creation of "deregulated, unsupervised, and unaccountable" privately managed for-profit schools has opened public coffers to "fraud and exploitation by large and small entrepreneurs."

In her zeal to trash the false prophets of educational reform, Ravitch sometimes goes too far. Forgetting, perhaps, that performance-based merit pay for teachers does not have to be tied to the grades of their students on standardized tests, she dismisses it as "the idea that never works and never dies." And her claim that electronic teaching "has its charms" but cannot compete with inspired teaching and lively interchanges of ideas is a false dichotomy.

These caveats aside, "Reign of Error" is an extraordinarily important book on an extraordinarily important subject. Ravitch's recommendations are especially noteworthy. Schools often fail, she reminds us, "because poverty overwhelms the best of intentions." And so, solutions must start with the provision of prenatal care for pregnant women; early childhood education; and medical services. Because summer learning losses among lower-income students contribute significantly to achievement gaps, schools should provide year-round academic programming and supervised after-school activities. Ravitch believes that for-profit charter schools and charter chains should be banned and high-stakes standardized testing reduced. Most importantly, she urges that education be recognized as a public responsibility, not a consumer good.

Educational reformers, Ravitch notes, would do well to look to Finland, where every child gets three meals a day and medical care; less than 5 percent of them grow up in poverty; teachers are
well trained and highly respected; students don't take a standardized test until they apply to
college but perform well on every international assessment in reading, mathematics and science;
and there are no vouchers or charter schools. Americans forget, Ravitch concludes, that the
United States became the world's leading power before the advent of test-based accountability and
privatization. It's time, she implies, to leave No Child Left Behind behind.
Diane Ravitch

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail: books@sfcchronicle.com