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In New Book, Ravitch Recants Long-Held Beliefs

By [Debra Viadero](#)

New York

Once a passionate advocate for injecting greater competition and accountability into the U.S. education system, the New York University scholar Diane Ravitch realized three years ago that her views had evolved to a point where she was contradicting herself on a regular basis. Like any good historian, she decided to set the record straight.

Her **newest book**, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, which was published this week by Basic Books, is the result of that effort. In 308 pages, it lays out the reasons for Ms. Ravitch's about-face on charter schools, school choice, and other market-oriented reform strategies in education, and explains why she no longer supports the federal No Child Left Behind Act and other efforts designed to hold schools and teachers accountable for their students' test results.

Along the way, the book also skewers much of President Barack Obama's agenda for improving the nation's schools; the recent involvement in the field of major foundations, including the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; vaunted school improvement efforts in New York City and elsewhere; and the growing emphasis on using test-score data to guide educational decisionmaking.



New York University Professor Diane Ravitch has written a new book in which she renounces her long-time support for improving public schools through choice, competition, and accountability.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

“People were writing and saying, ‘What’s happened to you?’ ” said Ms. Ravitch, who makes her views known each week in **Bridging Differences**, a popular *Education Week* blog that she co-writes with Deborah Meier, the progressive educator who founded New York City’s famed Central Park East School. “The sands of time were running out, and I didn’t want to die leaving the record uncorrected,” the 71-year-old writer said in an interview here at her 1895 brownstone in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

Because it’s not often that the field’s most influential thinkers publicly reverse themselves, Ms. Ravitch’s book started attracting attention from major news organizations, prominent educators, and influential think tanks even before its official publication date.

“She’s really smart, and she has this incredible experience. That’s why this book is so depressing,” said Mark Schneider, a former commissioner of the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a free-market-oriented think tank in Washington. The AEI is hosting a panel discussion on Ms. Ravitch’s book next week.

“It hits on so many of the big themes of the day and picks them all apart,” Mr. Schneider said, “but it doesn’t help me think about where to go tomorrow.”

Ties to Both Parties

From another point on the political spectrum, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, sees much to be happy about in the book, which also characterizes current attempts to tie teachers’ pay to their students’ test-score gains as “teacher bashing.”

“She’s open to new ideas, and when they don’t work, she has the courage to say that,” the union leader said of Ms. Ravitch. “What she says in her book is that schools work best on a collaboration-and-trust model, and not on a market-and-competitiveness model.”



Scholar Diane Ravitch explains the transformation in her thinking on U.S. education policy during an interview in her home office in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

Ms. Ravitch established her credentials as a conservative voice on education as far back as 1978, with the publication of her second book, *The Revisionists Revised*. In it, she critiqued what she called “radical attacks” on education from the left.

In the nearly 20 other books she has written, co-written, or edited over the years, she has also weighed in against progressive education and attempts on both the left and the right to make textbooks and standardized tests “politically correct.”

From 1991 to 1993, she was an assistant U.S. secretary of education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She served on the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress, from 1994 to 2007.

Ms. Ravitch was a founding member of the Koret Task Force, a group of scholars focusing on free-market solutions to education problems. She has since resigned from the Koret group, as well as from the board of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, another conservative-leaning research and advocacy group.

In reality, though, Ms. Ravitch has always been more complex in her views than her passionate, sometimes acerbic writings might suggest. The writer was a Democrat when she served in the first Bush administration, and her former husband, Richard Ravitch, a veteran mover and shaker in Democratic circles, is now the lieutenant governor of New York.

Ms. Ravitch registered as an independent after the 2000 presidential election, and framed pictures of her with former Presidents Bush, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan adorn her book-lined office on the fourth floor of her home. The mantle bears a photograph of Ms. Ravitch with the late AFT leader Albert Shanker, a longtime friend.

“I got caught up in the rising tide of enthusiasm for choice in education,” she writes in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* of her time in the first Bush administration. “I began to wonder why families should not be able to choose their children’s schools the way they choose their place of residence, their line of work, their shoes, or their car. In part, I was swept away by my immersion in the upper reaches of the first Bush presidency, where choice and competition were taken for granted as successful ways to improve student achievement.”

U-Turn on Charters

Ms. Ravitch expressed that view in *New Schools for a New Century*, a 1997 book she co-wrote with Joseph P. Viteritti Jr., suggesting that “the introduction of charter schools and contract-managed schools into public education may be exactly the impetus that is needed to promote meaningful performance standards for students and schools; the very existence of such schools will cause educators within the existing system to demand clear standards by which to measure school performance, as well as their own.”

Now, however, Ms. Ravitch sees that movement as a potential threat to traditional neighborhood public schools, which she believes are vital to preserving a democracy. Born in Houston to a family of eight children, Ms. Ravitch is herself a product of public schools, although she sent her own children to a private school. She went on to earn an undergraduate degree from Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass., and a doctorate from Columbia University, where she studied with the education historian Lawrence A. Cremin.

The problem with charter schools, Ms. Ravitch argues, is that they have moved from their original purpose as incubators of new ideas that could be exported to regular public schools to an alternative, and possibly even a replacement, school system.

Reading List

Diane Ravitch has written or edited more than 20 books related to education, including:

The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973 (1974)

The Revisionists Revised (1978)

The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980 (1983)

The Schools We Deserve (1985)

What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? (with Chester E. Finn Jr., 1987)

National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide (1995)

New Schools for a New Century (with Joseph P. Viteritti, 1997)

Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform (2000)

The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn (2003)

Edspeak: A Glossary of Education Terms, Phrases, Buzzwords, and Jargon (2007)

SOURCE: www.dianeravitch.com

"It's 'we're better than you, and we're going to take your school away,' " she said. "I like the original vision."

She was also persuaded to abandon her advocacy for charters, she writes, by evidence pointing to an uneven record of success among charter schools and what she sees in some cities as a tendency for charters to cream the highest-performing students and the best resources from the regular school system.

Among the studies offering evidence, both good and bad, on charter schools, Ms. Ravitch says she was particularly impressed by a 17-state study from last year that found that 37 percent of students in charter schools were making smaller learning gains than their peers in neighboring regular schools, and that 46 percent were performing on par with their regular public school counterparts.

As for the No Child Left Behind Act, Ms. Ravitch writes that she came to believe that it “ought to be ended rather than mended” at a 2006 conference in which researchers presented studies showing that parents with children in failing schools weren’t taking advantage of provisions of the law that would have enabled them to transfer their children out of those schools or get free tutoring.

Later, she also came to blame the law—the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was first passed in 1965—for putting too much emphasis on testing, narrowing the curriculum, and leading some educators to try to game the system by teaching to the test, lowering proficiency standards, or even cheating.

Chester E. Finn Jr., who attended the same meeting, said, “We looked at the same evidence of the reforms that America has undertaken to date and reached the same fairly glum conclusions that they haven’t been working very well.”

“We then come to very different conclusions about the way forward,” said Mr. Finn, a former assistant education secretary in the Reagan administration who is now the president of the Washington-based Fordham Institute. He has had a long association with Ms. Ravitch as a friend, philosophical ally, and one-time co-author.

“The joke is that she’s become the bona fide conservative and I’ve become the radical,” Mr. Finn said. “She’s more inclined to trust the traditional schools structure, and I’m more inclined to blow it all up.”

Losing Control

If the new book has a sense of urgency, it’s because Ms. Ravitch sees developments in education over the past 20 years as distinctly different from other periods of history, as control of public schools is increasingly being ceded to district administrators, big-money foundations, mayors, and federal officials. That, she says, is why the title of the book riffs off *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the classic 1961 book by Jane Jacobs that argued that modern urban planning was destroying inner-city communities.

Education Week Commentaries by Diane Ravitch

Time to Kill 'No Child Left Behind'

“It is too late to tweak NCLB. Seven years after it was signed into law, it is clear that the program deserves to be buried,” writes Diane Ravitch. (June 10, 2009)

Bridging Differences

In this commentary, Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch discuss conflicting ideas about schooling. (May 24, 2006)

'Tough Choices': Radical Ideas, Misguided Assumptions

Diane Ravitch writes that the recommendations from a recently released report calling for the overhaul of the U.S. education system "are not only radical but dubious." (Jan. 17, 2007)

National Standards

Standards-based reform proponent and education research professor Diane Ravitch states that the premise of "50 states, 50 standards" is a formula for incoherence and obfuscation. (Jan. 5, 2006)

Time to Save Federal Education Data

How can anyone trust the numbers if there is opportunity for politicians to massage the data or determine the time and manner of their release, ask Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr. (July 10, 2002)

Now Is the Time to Teach Democracy

What students need in the wake of the September 11 attacks is not more multicultural education writes Diane Ravitch, but rather a deeper understanding of world history and the rights and privileges inherent in our own democracy. (Oct. 17, 2001)

The Travails of the Bush Plan for Education

Diane Ravitch says that alternative testing proposals before Congress would seriously weaken the potential of President Bush's education plan. (May 2, 2001)

What If Research Really Mattered?

"Unlike educators, physicians have canons of scientific validity to protect innocent patients from unproven remedies and specious theories," writes Ravitch. (Dec. 16, 1998)

Why Students Don't Know Much About History

Those who care about history education must insist that states establish a strong history curriculum across the grades and that teachers of history are well prepared to teach it. (March 4, 1998)

SOURCE: *Education Week*

Ms. Ravitch traces the start of the deterioration of local control to the late 1980s and early 1990s when New York City's District 2 began to attract national attention for its districtwide reform efforts and its "balanced literacy" approach to teaching reading. It was a success formula that would later be replicated in increasingly heavy-handed ways, in her view, across the city and in other school districts.

The trend toward top-down control continued, she writes, when New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg took over the city's school system in 2002. He reorganized the management of the schools, pressed for merit pay, opened dozens of charter schools, broke up large high schools in small ones,

ramped up test-based accountability, assigned letter grades to schools, and closed dozens of low-performing schools.

Although she initially favored the takeover, Ms. Ravitch had changed her mind by 2004, becoming one of the school system's sharpest and most persistent critics.

The city's reform efforts, she adds, became a sort of blueprint for the NCLB law under President George W. Bush, which imposed consequences on schools and districts that failed to boost students' test scores.

Parents and local schools also lost some control as major philanthropies, such as the Gates Foundation, the Los Angeles-based Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Bentonville, Ark.-based Walton Family Foundation, began pouring unprecedented amounts of money into schools to underwrite initiatives that they favored, Ms. Ravitch argues.

"The money expended by a foundation—even one that spends \$100 million annually—may seem small in comparison to the hundreds of millions or billions spent by public school districts," she writes. "But the offer of a multimillion-dollar grant by a foundation is enough to cause most superintendents and school boards to drop everything and reorder their priorities."

The "hijacking" of public education continues now, Ms. Ravitch writes, with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's Race to the Top Fund, through which states enhance their competitive status for a share of \$4 billion in extra federal aid by putting in place education measures that the Department of Education favors.

"No one up until now thought that the job of the department was to compel states to accept specific reforms," she said, such as accountability efforts that tie teacher salaries to student test scores and the lifting of state-imposed caps on charter schools.

One constant in Ms. Ravitch's 40 years in the field has been her advocacy of a strong curriculum, rich in the humanities and steeped in the classics. As the Education Department's assistant secretary for educational research and improvement, Ms. Ravitch guided the development of voluntary national academic standards—an effort that fizzled when controversy later ensued over standards for teaching U.S. history and control of the White House shifted from the first President Bush to President Bill Clinton.

"It wasn't that they failed. They never got off the ground," she said of the proposed standards. "You can't have a full and rich education by teaching only basic skills."

Even so, Ms. Ravitch turns a skeptical eye on current efforts to develop common academic standards across states designed to prepare students for college or a career—in part because President Obama has proposed using federal Title I aid as an inducement for states to adopt them. ("[Standards, Title I Link Scrutinized](#)," March 3, 2010.)

“So much compulsion is being attached to standards that are not yet developed or even officially released,” she said.

‘Old-Fashioned View’?

To the Stanford University economist Eric A. Hanushek, who is both a critic and a friend of Ms. Ravitch’s, the book’s endorsement of neighborhood public schools, the professional wisdom of teachers, and a strong, broad curriculum represents an “old-fashioned view of education.”

“The evidence is that the old-fashioned schools that she rather likes weren’t all that good,” said Mr. Hanushek. “What U.S. schools did best was get large proportions of the population to go through secondary schools. Then things stalled in the sense that achievement levels weren’t that high. It’s not something we should be nostalgic about.”

Readers of *Bridging Differences*, the dialogue-style, “Dear Deborah/Dear Diane” blog that Ms. Ravitch writes with Ms. Meier, won’t find Ms. Ravitch’s ideological evolution much of a surprise. Although they hail from different ideological camps, the two writers—who drew attention to their budding rapprochement in a [2006 Education Week Commentary](#)—have come to agree often enough over the past three years that some readers have dubbed the blog “bridging similarities.”

One place where they continue to differ, Ms. Meier says, may be the perch from which they see the field. While Ms. Ravitch is primarily a researcher of education policy, Ms. Meier is at heart a classroom teacher.

“I’m delighted to have this intellectual comradeship with her,” said Ms. Meier. “The mistakes I find in the book are largely ignoring how superficial the influence of external mandates are. For good and bad, teachers have always largely taught in the ways they are familiar with, regardless of external mandates.”

The two educators will continue to blog, nonetheless, over “things we are equally indignant about,” according to Ms. Meier. Among the worst of the educational ideas upon which they both agree, Ms. Ravitch writes, “is the current obsession with making our schools work like a business.”

That trend, Ms. Ravitch says, “threatens to destroy public education.” And she concludes her book by asking, “Who will stand up to the tycoons and politicians and tell them so?”