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### The Death and Life of Market-Based Reform: An Essay Review

Sherman Dorn

University of South Florida

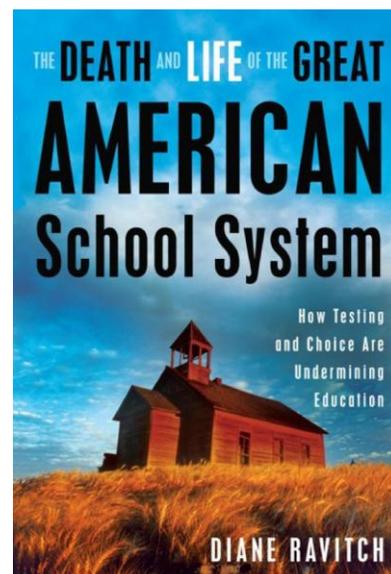
Ravitch, Diane. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books.

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In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch provides readers with a clear and detailed criticism of recent school reforms such as No Child Left Behind and the expansion of charter schools. In doing so, she also explains her own growing disillusionment over the past five years with market-based reforms and high-stakes testing policies. Basic Books sold out several printings in less than a month, and the book's bestseller status is an indication of the deep need among teachers for ways to talk about technocratic school reform that affirm their central role in schools as intellectuals, not functionaries.



In an autobiographical first chapter, Ravitch describes her various roles in education policy debates: her books on the history of education, her appointment to head the former Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the George H. W. Bush administration, her absorption into the network of think tank and other foundation-funded advocates of market-oriented education reform, and her growing disenchantment with No Child Left Behind and local examples of test-based or market-based reform efforts. With the exception of the first and ninth chapter, however, Ravitch writes less about her experiences than the recent history of education reform efforts in the United States. She finds fads in many highly-touted efforts from Alan Bersin's superintendency in San Diego to Joel Klein's chancellorship in New York, No Child Left Behind, and what Ravitch calls the publicly-unaccountable influence of the Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations in pushing a specific, reductionist reform agenda.



On the whole, Ravitch's themes will be familiar to those who have read other mainstream criticisms of high-stakes testing. She argues that the emphasis on testing has encouraged schools to teach to the test by narrowing the curriculum and diverting instructional time to test preparation. She points out that test-score inflation is common and No Child Left Behind encouraged a number of states to set low cut-scores for proficiency. She argues that charter school policies and practices have strayed far from Al Shanker's notion of freeing teachers and parents to run their own schools in innovative ways, and she conscientiously describes research that fails to provide consensus confirmation of the core market assumptions of choice advocates. And underneath it all, she worries that technocratic reform efforts undermine the public value of public schooling.

What she adds to the general critique are specific stories: how Tony Alvarado's consensus work in District 2 in New York City became Alan Bersin's top-down mandates in San Diego and Joel Klein's schizophrenic juggernaut back in New York. She traces the history of charter schools from an idea about teacher initiative to the growth of charter management organizations with “philanthropic venture

capital” backing them. And she sketches a modern history of foundation efforts in school reform from the late 1960s to the present. In addition to commenting on her own changed views, the most important original contribution of *Death and Life* is her description of and criticism of philanthropic foundations' influences on school reform. Ravitch points out that for organizations putatively concerned with accountability, the Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations are entirely unaccountable to the public for their own actions.

As is common with Ravitch's books, *Death and Life* is eminently readable, and she represents a significant portion of the critics of high-stakes accountability and market-oriented education policy. Her proposed alternative to high-stakes testing and competition is a rich curriculum. To Ravitch, the greatest long-term damage from high-stakes accountability has been the cheapening of what teachers have to teach: in Ravitch's view, too many times it reduces to test preparation in two subjects. It is notable that Ravitch's curriculum views are not shared by all critics of high-stakes testing (including Ravitch's partner in blogging, Deborah Meier), but teachers have flocked to *Death and Life* in a way that they have not responded to books by other critics. This positive response says something significant about the professional identity of teachers (or at least the teachers who are reading Ravitch), with Ravitch's curriculum-focused perspective affirming the dignity and importance of elementary and secondary teachers.

While *Death and Life* is not primarily a history book, it contains several interesting arguments about recent education history, and she relies on historical claims to make the case that curriculum standards are the logical alternative to current fads. One relatively minor point but a point important to her broad argument is that the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, was motivated to improve public schooling, not destroy it:

The language was flamboyant, but that's how a report about education gets public attention... *A Nation at Risk* was notable for what it did not say. It

did not echo Reagan's oft-expressed wish to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. It did not support or even discuss his other favorite education causes: vouchers and school prayer. It did not refer to market-based competition and choice among schools; it did not suggest restructuring schools or school systems. It said nothing about closing schools, privatization, state takeover of districts, or other heavy-handed forms of accountability. (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 24-25)

This argument is in contrast with Berliner and Biddle's (1995) discussion of the report and what they thought were its harmful consequences. Ravitch is correct that there is no evidence either that Secretary Terrell Bell or the members of the commission wished to destroy public schools and considerable evidence suggests that Bell had outflanked President Reagan by appointing the commission and successfully disseminating the report's central criticisms of schools (e.g., Bell, 1988).

Yet *A Nation at Risk* valorized the use of test scores to shame schools when it used average annual SAT scores as a lynchpin of the case for change. Perhaps the unintended consequence of the report's flamboyant language was encouraging the publication of standardized test scores, but I am doubtful; the year after its publication, Secretary Bell began publishing (mediocre) comparative data on states (e.g., Ginsburg, Noell, & Plisko, 1988), an act inconsistent with Ravitch's argument that *A Nation at Risk* was a separate act from the development of public judgment through school statistics. Most education historians draw a line from *A Nation at Risk* to *No Child Left Behind* (e.g., Vinovskis, 2009), and while there may have been different potential ways that education policy could have followed *A Nation at Risk*, a harsh and somewhat reductionist judgment of public schooling was embedded in the report.

Also early in the book, Ravitch argues that the standards-based reform impulse of the 1980s and early 1990s became diverted towards testing when Lynne Cheney successfully attacked the voluntary national history standards project

headed by Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree (also see Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997). This contingency is the key story Ravitch tells about the last quarter century: *if only it had been different* is the unwritten phrase when she reports, “The standards movement died in 1995... the state standards created as a substitute for national standards steered clear of curriculum content” (p. 20). Of the various standards-development projects funded by the federal government in the early 1990s with the sponsorship of Ravitch and the Secretary of Education she served with, Lamar Alexander, the history standards were the closest to a consensual focus on disciplinary foundations—the core of the draft standards document on U.S. history comprised dozens of thought-provoking questions about the dilemmas of writing the constitution, civil war causation, and other central features of standard history courses. The initial standards document also included teaching examples, and Cheney professed herself horrified that these examples underrepresented famous American patriots (and then implied or lied that these teaching examples *were* the standards). A subsequent review by the Council for Basic Education (1996) confirmed the integrity of the standards core, but the damage of Cheney's name-dropping trivia was done to the voluntary national history standards. And, Ravitch argues, to a more thoughtful standards movement in general as Cheney's successful demagoguery made state officials too skittish to write specific state standards.

There is some evidence that Ravitch's argument is plausible: the first round of state standards writing was full of vapid “standards” and “benchmarks.” But in the end, her historical argument focusing on the importance of Cheney's attack is not entirely persuasive: the attacks on the voluntary history standards were not the primary cause of poor standards documents or a diversion from curriculum standards towards standardized test obsessions. First, there is a long history of curriculum politics, as Ravitch has written about repeatedly. After the culture wars of the late 1980s, anyone looking at the standards-writing projects in the early 1990s could have predicted ideological battles, but probably would not have picked history—I would have guessed science or English literature. Apart from Cheney's war against history

and the current social studies controversy in Texas, the targets of such attacks have generally been in biology, with evolution as the third rail of curriculum standards. If Cheney had not attacked the history standards, those controversies probably still would have erupted in Ohio and Kansas. Moreover, the first round of state-level curriculum standards did not need Cheney's help to be as awful as they generally were. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics had published a controversial (and oft-criticized) set of standards in 1989, and a number of the voluntary standards efforts concurrent with the history project had become so unwieldy that they had begun to sink of their own weight long before Cheney started attacking the work of Nash and Crabtree. Some states drafted vague standards. A few, notably Virginia's 1995 Standards of Learning, were so detailed as to border on curricular fetishizing. The halting progress of state-level standards is what one would expect from the history of reform efforts. Perhaps I am cynical, but in retrospect, why would any disinterested observer ever have believed that a first round of curriculum standards-writing would generally be competent?

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Ravitch's argument implies that if the first round of standards writing had been significantly better, we might not have witnessed the current obsession with math and reading test scores. While it is true that Laura and Daniel Resnick (1992) were making the argument at the time that teaching to the test was not a problem if you had a good enough test (aligned appropriately with the curriculum), the history of modern testing began long before the mid-90s, Title I had been linked to commercial standardized tests since the mid-1960s, and the die in favor of standardized tests was cast long before the 1989 Charlottesville summit that created national education goals and encouraged the development of curriculum standards. We might have had better state-level curriculum standards, and we should have better ones today, but the rest of Ravitch's counterfactual argument is tenuous. My historian's quibbles should not deter anyone from reading *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. Ravitch has written an accessible critique of high-stakes testing that is detailed and thoughtful. She has captured the

audience that has eluded those of us who have tried before (e.g., Dorn, 2007; Glass, 2008; Koretz, 2008; McNeil, 2000; Meier & Woods, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Popham, 2004; Rothstein, 2004; Sacks, 1999; Sirotnik, 2004). She has my admiration in that success; the need was obviously there, and I am grateful that someone has filled the gap in a way that has reached thousands of readers.

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## About the Reviewer

Sherman Dorn is a professor of education at the University of South Florida and the author of “The Political Dilemmas of Formative Assessment” (*Exceptional Children*, spring 2010) and *Accountability Frankenstein: Understanding and Taming the Monster* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007).



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Gene V Glass  
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