

***Left Back and Reign of Error:***  
**Reflections on the Thinking of Diane Ravitch**  
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Diane Ravitch in 2013 wrote a powerful book, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. In 2000 she published another powerful book, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*. I read the first book shortly after becoming CEO of the State Higher Education Executive Officers and the second more recently after retiring from that position in 2013.

***Left Back***

It would be fair to say that *Left Back* contributed to ideas driving the No Child Left Behind legislation initiated by the George W. Bush administration. Ravitch was Assistant Secretary for Educational Research in the administration of his father, George H.W. Bush. By contrast *Reign of Error* is an unequivocal critique of both "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top," the school reform initiative of the Barack Obama administration.

Some would say Diane Ravitch has made a turn of 180 degrees – a dramatic about face. And there is no question that she has changed positions on some fundamental questions of educational policy.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/06/13/diane-ravitch-to-obama-i-will-never-understand-why-you-decided-to-align-your-education-policy-with-that-of-george-w-bush/> But I suspect to the extent she has changed, she has shifted views on the means of achieving the purposes of education, not the ends themselves. I also expect that, even in 2000, she had serious doubts about the mechanisms for educational improvement eventually employed in No Child Left Behind.

*Left Back* is a wide-ranging, comprehensive history of schooling in the United States, and it is impossible to do it justice in a few words. But the core message of this book, as I read it, is a call for balance between "traditional education," focusing on the fundamental skills of language and mathematics along with teaching history and science and "progressive education" which focuses on student engagement and well-being, sometimes to the neglect of traditional subjects. Ravitch acknowledges "*It is no simple matter to demarcate the divide* [emphasis in original] between what is called traditional education and what is called progressive education," and she finds it easy to fault both perspectives at their extremes.

In the penultimate chapter of *Left Back*, "In Search of Standards" Ravitch describes the warring "movements" of the 1980s and 1990s: The Multicultural Movement; The Self-Esteem Movement; The Standards Movement, including creating national goals, history standards, English standards, and mathematics standards; The Constructivist Movement; and the Whole Language Movement, opposed by the Phonics Movement. This chapter ends with a call to seek "the powerful middle ground."

In the concluding chapter of *Left Back* Ravitch writes, "*If there is anything to be learned from the river of ink that was spilled in [emphasis in original] the education disputes of the twentieth century, it is that anything in education that is labeled a 'movement' should be avoided like the plague.*" The "middle ground" she advocates, nevertheless reveals a tilt toward traditional education and a call for significant improvement. I quote from the concluding pages:

"Perhaps in the past it was possible to undereducate a significant portion of the population without causing serious harm to the nation. No longer. Education today, more than any time in the past, is the key to successful participation in society. A boy or girl who cannot read, write, or use mathematics is locked out of every sort of educational opportunity. A man or woman without a good elementary and secondary education is virtually precluded from higher education, from many desirable careers, from full participation in our political system, and from enjoyment of civilization's greatest aesthetic treasures. The society that allows large numbers of its citizens to remain uneducated, ignorant, or semiliterate, squanders its greatest asset, the intelligence of its people.

The disciplines taught in school are uniquely valuable, both for individuals and for society.... [science, history, principles of self-government, great literature and art, cultivating shared values and ideals among cultures] ... A society that tolerates anti-intellectualism in its schools can expect to have a dumbed-down culture that honors celebrity and sensation rather than knowledge and wisdom.

Schools will not be rendered obsolete by new technologies because their role as learning institutions has become more important than in the past. Technology can supplement schooling but not replace it; even the most advanced electronic technologies are incapable of turning their worlds of information into mature knowledge, a form of intellectual magic that requires skilled and educated teachers.

To be effective, schools must concentrate on their fundamental mission of teaching and learning. And they must do it for all children. That must be the overarching goal of schools in the twenty-first century." (*Left Back*, pp.466-467)

### ***Reign of Error***

Assuming the school reform movement of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century sought these objectives, Diane Ravitch now concludes the strategies employed to achieve them got just about everything wrong. The errors Ravitch outlines in the thirty-three chapters of the book may be summarized in the following broad categories:

- I. The false belief that the effects of poverty and disadvantage in impeding student achievement can readily and easily be overcome by more effective education.
- II. The false assumption that higher standards, measured by standardized tests, and accompanied by high stakes accountability will generate improvement by increasing the motivation and innovation of teachers and students.
- III. The false belief that creating options to public education through charters and vouchers will stimulate competition and improve public schools.
- IV. The false belief that opportunities for private sector profit-making will bring improved management talent and innovation to education and accelerate improvement.
- V. The false belief that grading schools and teachers according to standardized test results with incentives and sanctions (including firing the least successful teachers and closing the least successful schools) will improve the system.
- VI. The false belief that recruiting non-professional educators to leadership positions and very talented young people without educational training to short-term careers as teachers (Teach for America) can lead to dramatic improvements in school quality.
- VII. The false belief that tenure and the absence of merit pay are a drag on educational quality, which can be cured by eliminating union contracts and union influence in K-12 education.

Ravitch assembles evidence to argue that it is entirely unrealistic to expect schools to offset entirely the barriers to learning associated with poverty – poor pre-natal care, poor or absent pre-school education, hunger, poor health care, and instability of home life. She also argues that the evidence shows each of the reform strategies based on erroneous beliefs have failed

to generate the supposed improvements. Moreover, she maintains they have made the situation worse by demoralizing educators, removing resources from schools, and misallocating remaining resources to unproductive purposes, such as test-prep instruction and profits for for-profit providers.

She also assembles evidence arguing that public education in the US has been gradually improving despite all these failed “reforms,” and that in the international context the United States has not suffered economically from the supposed failures of our educational system over the past 30 or 40 years. (I would counter that the nation has done pretty well due to the investments we made in the education of the baby-boom generation. At the same time, for younger people economic inequality has grown within the United States, largely due to inequality in educational attainment. Sustainable prosperity is at risk.)

*Reign of Error* is a passionate defense of public education, a vote of confidence in professional teachers and educational leaders, and a call for both increased public investment and a reallocation of resources from private entities and interests that have drained dollars and failed to produce better results.

## **My reflections**

I found *Left Back* persuasive when I read it soon after it was published. And I find *Reign of Error* persuasive when I read it today. But I also have nearly 50 years of personal experience in education and education policy that lead me to look for some “middle ground” in my assessment of *Reign of Error*. The more recent book, unlike *Left Back*, argues essentially from one perspective on the question of school reform, reflecting profound disappointment in the political response to her earlier work.

I believe Dr. Ravitch has it mostly right on all of the “errors” cited above. That said, I’d offer some qualifications on several and perhaps a slightly different perspective on others.

- I. I agree that it is entirely unrealistic to expect educators to overwhelm the effects of poverty on children – to expect the schools to compensate for and equalize the many advantages that the children of prosperous, well-educated children have in comparison to the children of poor, less well-educated parents.

Nevertheless, better education for poor children, along with other public policies to address persistent disadvantage, is essential for reducing poverty and its harmful effects on the children and

society. Closing those gaps must be a public and an educational priority. Educators can't be faulted for resisting unrealistic expectations, but they should embrace, not resist higher aspirations.

- II. High stakes accountability based on high standards and frequent standardized assessments is a poor theory for change. It is unsurprising that it has failed. If the expectations are unrealistic, and the stakes too high, practitioners (and students) will resist even good assessments, much less flawed ones.

Accountability needs to be shared between policy makers who provide resources and influence the conditions of practice, and practitioners who work to generate better results on the ground. They need to be collaborators seeking continuing improvement. If accountability is designed to find fault rather than inspire improvement it is likely to find fault where it doesn't exist and degrade, rather than improve performance. Trust and common purpose are essential ingredients of progress.

Common purpose, however, requires a shared understanding of objectives. Properly employed, the Common Core Standards or an equivalent of shared aspirations should have and could still play an important role in educational improvement. For fundamental aspects of communication and mathematics the world *has* common standards, and teachers and learners should seek to achieve them. I prefer, however, the term learning objectives rather than standards. The former term suggests an aspiration, a goal; the latter suggests impending judgment and more strongly sets up the project for failure. In the United States the term "standards" is deeply associated psychologically with high stakes, fault-finding accountability.

Perhaps the most harmful failure of "school reform" has been the strategy of attacking educators, rather than working to win their support. Both sides share some blame for this failure to collaborate, and it will take time and effort to reset the relationship and repair the damage.

- III. Vigorous efforts to "prove" that choice generated by vouchers and charters improve education have fallen far short. The degree of performance variability among charters and among regular public schools is great, and most studies find no consistent or significant difference between the two options. The factors that determine

which children attend which type of school and the individual characteristics of different schools appear to be far more important determinants of average student performance, not whether the school is a "charter" or a regular public school.

"Choice" will continue to be a factor in the decision parents make about schooling for their children, but other things being equal, a school near home will always be preferable to one farther away. The clearest outcomes of the "choice" strategy within a school district are more stress, time, and money invested in the selection process, higher costs for transportation, and more time children spend getting from home to school and back. Many parents *choose* to move where their children can attend good neighborhood schools. The ultimate solution is good neighborhood schools.

- IV. For a host of reasons, the idea that market-based incentives and enterprises depending on private investment capital can lead educational progress is fatally flawed. Investment capital, by its very nature, seeks continuing and growing returns. Among other important factors, the market works best when the consumer can easily and inexpensively make judgments and choices among available products, when the product's quality and utility does not vary greatly in meeting the needs of individual consumers, and when the demand for the product and its supply are "scalable" without degrading quality and consumer satisfaction.

The financial success of for-profit enterprises in education has depended almost entirely on significant public purchases or subsidies of their products through student grants and loans. In far too many cases educational "success" has fallen far short of expectations, returning poor value for money. And the ultimate consumers of the "product," teachers, parents, and students, are often quite far removed from the purchasing decisions. In the case of postsecondary student grants and loans, investor demand for continually growing returns has generated "recruit and admit" business models, with inadequate attention to student, satisfaction, retention, and completion. Too many students have enrolled, failed to complete, and accumulated debts they cannot afford to pay.

Perhaps the most important factor in these failures is the idea, hope, or illusion that "scalable, self-contained, complete solutions" can be devised for the complex process of teaching and learning for large numbers of people with varying needs and abilities. It is difficult, perhaps impossible to "scale" effective education without

the individual attention achievable in good schools.

- V. Linda Darling-Hammond's quote, "You can't fire your way to Finland," captures the fallacy of improving education by grading schools and teachers and then dismissing teachers and closing schools with low grades. Although in extreme cases teachers may need to be dismissed or schools re-organized, this general strategy has generated more demoralization than improvement.

The quality of the nation's educators depends on their training, experience, supervision, and continuing professional development. It also depends, importantly, on whether educators' compensation and working conditions are sufficient to attract capable people to the field. The quality of American education in the future depends on the nation's ability to improve all of these requirements.

- VI. It is demonstrably false that a person without specialized training in education *can never* succeed as a school, district, or college leader. Some have. But I believe it is equally, and *more emphatically* false, that the pathway to educational improvement is to recruit educators and educational leaders who have little or no background or training in education. For good reason, this kind of logic is applied to no other professional field. It should not be applied to education.

The impatience of political leaders, and the mistaken idea that people successful in some other field will naturally know how to succeed as an educational leader, has created enormous and harmful instability in education leadership. As I wrote in another context:

"In November 2015 the median tenure of a state chief school officer was 14 months. Of the 58 chief state school officers, 29 had fewer than 15 months in the job. Only eight out of the 58 people holding such jobs have served five years or more. When I became CEO of the State Higher Education Executive Officers in 2000, governors directly appointed four members of the association. By 2013, governors had acquired the authority to appoint the state's postsecondary education policy leader in five additional states. The average tenure of a SHEEO in those nine states during the period 2000 to 2014 was 2.4 years." (Lingenfelter, *Change Magazine: 2016*)

I would agree with those who argue we need to improve the quality

of educational leaders in the United States. But neither logic nor experience indicate the way improve quality is to put non-professionals in positions of educational leadership.

- VII. Dr. Ravitch's final argument (among those I have summarized above) is a defense of the union movement in education and the typical provisions of union contracts concerning merit pay and tenure. Perhaps her most compelling argument is that the states with the best National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, (NAEP) tend to be states with strong unions, and the states with the worst scores tend not to have unions. This doesn't rise to the level of demonstrating a causal relationship, but it contradicts the claim that unions degrade achievement.

I think, however, the issues are more complicated. Neither unions nor policy makers deserve a pass. I'll try to address this question in my closing comments.

The last dozen chapters of *Reign of Error* offer solutions, or actions to improve education including, among others, pre-natal care and pre-school, strengthening the profession, abandoning, corporate, privatization strategies, reducing class sizes, proving wrap-around services to children in need, de-emphasizing high stakes standardized testing, and re-emphasizing the importance and priority of neighborhood public schools. These are all sensible suggestions.

While acknowledging the errors of "corporate reform" as I have above, I cannot imagine Dr. Ravitch's solutions" being implemented without changing the currently polarized dynamic of education politics in the United States. The need for higher educational attainment, which was broadly recognized at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has launched more "battles over school reform" than constructive change. Real improvement in education will take changes in educational policy and educational practice, and "re-setting" relationships between policy makers and educators.

Toward that end I would emphasize the following "solutions."

1. ***Policy makers and educators strive to create a better balance between freedom and structure in K-12 public education.***

Senator Michael Bennet, when he was in the midst of union negotiations as Superintendent of Denver Public Schools, commented, "It is no wonder we have detailed, rigid provisions in union contracts when we consider how we have employed command and control tactics in the administration of public education."



States and school districts have created volumes of law and regulation governing public schools, ranging from highly prescribed (while inconsistently applied) rules for teacher and principal certification, textbooks, number of school days, hours of instruction curricular standards, and assessments. In addition to their suffocating volume and complexity, such rules and standards vary greatly among states. As a result, public schools operate under a large blanket of incoherent bureaucratic regulation and procedure compounded by equally rigid union negotiated work rules and procedures. The detailed complexity of such rules and the resulting inflexibility in employment procedures and operations is the principal argument for charter schools.

At one extreme, unlimited freedom, whether based on states' rights, local control of schools, or total freedom for teachers to teach whatever and how they wish, means education lacks coherent goals and meaningful standards of excellence. At the other extreme of excessive standardization and control, education lacks the flexibility and efficiency essential for creativity, adaptation, and improved effectiveness.

Ironically and sadly, multiple actors competing for influence and control – the federal government, states, local districts, and unions – have given us the worst of both worlds. We have confusing, multiple, incoherent goals and objectives combined with rigid rules and procedures. The Common Core Standards initiative sought to escape this dilemma by creating “fewer, higher, internationally benchmarked” standards in language arts and mathematics, which virtually everyone agrees are the two foundational objectives of education.

Unfortunately, the potential for the Common Core to provide a foundation for education improvement has been delayed, if not thwarted by the errors of high stakes accountability in the use of the Common Core. These have generated persistent efforts by some states, districts, and teachers to resist “outside” influence and continue generating their own “unique” standards. If every state, district, or teacher naturally gravitated to focused, coherent, and appropriate learning objectives, this would not be a problem. But past experience suggests that won't happen. It will be difficult for the nation to improve educational outcomes if we fail to develop a working consensus on our objectives and cooperatively pursue them.

**2. *Policy makers and educators must strengthen the attractiveness of the profession in order to attract and retain***

**talented people.** I agree with every word Diane Ravitch wrote in Chapter 29 of *Reign of Error*, "Strengthen the Profession," and I'll add a few of my own.

Ravitch begins by deploring the tendency of appointing non-educators to leadership positions. I agree but observe that policy makers sometimes turn to non-educators because they are convinced most educators find it difficult to overcome the inertia of established bureaucratic policy and practice that impedes progress. The strategy of employing "outsiders" often fails, but occasionally it seems to help. It would help educators become less defensive and more creative if politicians would stop attacking them indiscriminately. Constructive leadership and initiative by educators focused on improvement would also help. Both the extreme critics of education and the extreme critics of policy initiatives need to move toward the middle.

Although there is room for improvement in salaries and benefits (a lot of room in some areas of the country,) I believe improving working conditions should be the highest priority for increasing the attractiveness of education as a profession. Education is inherently a rewarding, although sometimes an especially challenging profession. Misguided policies, unfair criticism, and the failure to provide essential supports have driven good teachers from the profession and discouraged the entry of talented people who might choose it. Along with the practices Dr. Ravitch recommends it would help if:

- a. Teachers were provided more opportunities to collaborate and work in teams in order to improve instruction;
- b. Clearly defined career paths for advancement, not bonuses or merit pay based on flawed assessments, were established to recognize leadership and excellence in teaching; and
- c. Educators and policy makers would establish more trusting, collaborative relationships in order to identify policies and initiatives that justify the investment of additional resources.

**3. Educators, with the support of constructive public policies, should work to increase the capabilities of practicing professionals.** A commonplace explanation for the supposed "deterioration" of public education is that (long overdue) increased opportunities for talented women to enter other professions has shrunk the pool of available talent. To the extent this is true, it increases the urgency of the need to make teaching more competitive among the professions by improving compensation and working conditions.

Even if the quality of the profession has *not* deteriorated, the capabilities of educators may not be sufficient to meet present challenges. The increased importance of educational attainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the challenges of reducing attainment gaps and educating a larger fraction of the population to higher levels, requires *improving* the capabilities of teachers and school leaders.

Such improvement will take better pre-service training, better supervision and mentoring of practicing teachers, better in-service professional development, and better standards for entry into the profession. Around the time Dr. Ravitch was writing *Reign of Error*, two promising initiatives were launched to improve pre-service education and improved state practices for becoming a certified teacher.

The first was a 2012 report by a task force of the Chief State School Officers, *Our Responsibility, Our Promise*.

[https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Our%20Responsibility%20Our%20Promise\\_2012.pdf](https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Our%20Responsibility%20Our%20Promise_2012.pdf) This report “promised” to reform teacher and school leader certification policies. Traditionally state policies tended to require compliance with various training regimens without actually assessing whether teachers and school leaders have the knowledge and capability to be effective. Such policies are not only ineffective, they have been inconsistently applied, making “traditional training programs” unnecessarily cumbersome and bureaucratic, while permitting “alternative pathways” to certification to exist with few or not meaningful standards of quality. States also vary widely in the rigor of criteria for becoming a teacher. For example, many states require prospective teachers to pass the Praxis II exams demonstrating mastery of basic skills, but the standards for entry to the profession vary widely among states.

The recommendations of the report include increasing the academic standards for entry to and exit from educator preparation programs, strengthening requirements for in-school supervised experience in preparation programs, giving greater emphasis to assessments of candidates’ abilities to perform as effective instructors before licensure, and developing data systems that would enable programs to monitor the performance and retention of their graduates in the profession and states to identify stronger and weaker programs on these dimensions.

At the same time, two competing educator preparation accreditors, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and

the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, (TEAC,) agreed to merge into the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and implement new standards for educator preparation programs. The CAEP [standards](#) focused on: 1) the program's ability to ensure candidates acquire essential content and pedagogical knowledge; 2) the program's effective use of clinical partnerships in giving candidates supervised clinical experience; 3) the program's capabilities in recruiting higher quality candidates that can meet the needs of schools in terms of diversity, academic ability, and subject matter expertise; 4) the program's demonstrated impact on students and the ability to satisfy graduates and employers with the quality of their preparation; and 5) the program's collection and use of data to assure quality and drive continuing improvement.

The CCSSO report and the CAEP standards reflected a welcome convergence of initiative and direction from K-12 and higher education leaders to strengthen the preparation of educators. Perhaps unrealistically, I have hoped for more rapid change and progress that I've been able to observe since 2012. I have seen little evidence of follow-through by states in changing their practices in certifying teachers and educator preparation programs. Although CAEP has moved forward in employing the new standards, the accreditation process, in my view, has continued to be bogged down in minutia, rather than strongly focusing on the core issues represented by the five principle criteria of the standards.

The long tradition of over-prescribing in K-12 education and the still harmful echoes of high-stakes accountability seem to have sidetracked the implementation of these initiatives. Future progress in education will be advanced if institutions of higher education and state K-12 education leaders find ways of building on the principles advanced in these initiatives.

**4. Educators should embrace and become proficient in techniques for improving instructional outcomes.** "Improvement science" is a technique, following the leadership of William Edwards Deming, that has been used to improve quality and efficiency in manufacturing and health care. Tony Bryk, President of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has worked to promote the use of improvement science to improve educational outcomes. <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/six-core-principles-improvement/>. The Carnegie Foundation first focused its attention on improving student success in remedial mathematics in community colleges. Following some promising results from this project, Carnegie

has worked to broaden the application of these techniques to other areas of education.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment is a higher education initiative <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org> that encourages, documents, and facilitates the use of learning assessments as a means of improving instruction and student outcomes in higher education. Related efforts, the Degree Qualifications Profile <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/dqp/> and the Essential Learning Outcomes <https://www.aacu.org/essential-learning-outcomes>, developed by higher education scholars, sought much like the K-12 Common Core Standards, to articulate clearly learning objectives as a means of focusing instructional effort and advancing student achievement.

Achieving progress through professional efforts to improve outcomes through disciplined self-assessment based on shared objectives and disciplined analysis of the learning process is the fundamental strategy of such efforts. This is antithetical to top-down, high stakes “accountability” based on externally imposed objectives.