



The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education

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About The Author:

Diane Ravitch is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a Research Professor of Education at New York University. She served as Assistant Secretary of Education during the George H.W. Bush administration. During the Clinton administration, she served on the National Assessment Governing Board. Ravitch is also the author or editor of more than 20 books on education.

General Overview:

In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch explains why broadly popular ideas for restructuring schools have had no positive impact on the quality of American education. She reconsiders the evolution of her own views on key issues and reveals her skepticism regarding charter schools, privatization, accountability, and the philanthropists who are trying to control school reform using business models for school planning.

Drawing on over 40 years of research and observation on education, Ravitch also offers prescriptions for improving our schools.

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Introduction

The United States has embarked on a crusade to reform education. Voices on the Left and the Right agree that it is imperative to improve student test scores. To this end, accountability, choice, and market-based solutions have been touted as panaceas for improving America's educational system. However, standardized testing, vouchers, charter-schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act have not delivered on their promises. In fact, many of the reforms have had little or no effect. And in many cases, the reforms have backfired.

The reform movement assumes that applying business management techniques and free market principles will improve the educational system. A market-based perspective assumes that schools should compete for students, ineffective teachers should be fired, and unsuccessful schools should be shuttered. Market incentives and penalties work in business, so why shouldn't they apply to the educational system as well? Holding teachers and schools accountable for student performance is the best way to create a world class educational system, the reformists argue.

Market-based solutions are not a cure for all our ills. Market economies are far better at delivering goods and services than command-and-control economies. However, the recent financial collapse highlights the limitations of deregulation and laissez faire economics. There are some things that should not be privatized, such as police and fire departments. Education is another public good that should not be privatized. Put simply, our democratic society requires a vibrant public educational system that produces well-rounded and broadly educated citizens, not just students who are trained to excel on multiple choice tests.

Standardized tests have their place in assessing educational achievement, but teaching to the test is corrupting the learning process.

To begin with, a narrow-minded focus on improving reading and math scores has led school systems to cut back on the arts, the humanities (social studies, history, and literature), and physical education.

Second, teaching to the tests encourages dubious practices that artificially raise test scores. For instance, school systems can inflate tests scores by expelling low performers or refusing to enroll less-promising students.

Finally, firing teachers and closing schools based on a single measure is a deeply flawed way of solving our educational problems. True education involves qualities that are not always easy to measure. Teachers are not the only variables that matter when it comes to education; students are shaped by parents and communities as well. Further, even the best teachers cannot improve the scores of every single student. Firing teachers and closing schools when tests scores fail to rise is a shortsighted approach to fixing education. Not surprisingly, it hasn't worked.

To improve education, we first need a vision of what good education consists of. We want students to be able to read, write, and be mathematically literate. But we also want to install character, a sense of civic responsibility, and a love of learning. “To move towards that vision, we should attend to the quality of the curriculum – that is, what is taught. Every school should have a well-conceived coherent, sequential curriculum.” Ultimately, what is taught is far more important than the latest pedagogical fad.

A curriculum is a roadmap, not a cure-all. A curriculum reflects the subject matter our society values. More specifically, a curriculum spells out what students need to learn in order to become educated and productive citizens. No doubt, developing a national consensus on a curriculum is complicated by the culture wars. However, the absence of a curriculum in schools leaves a vacuum that is filled by faddish educational techniques and jargon, which are often worse than useless.

Currently, our system of public education is in trouble as recent reform measures are very often counterproductive. Our schools need to be places where teachers love to teach and students love to learn. Tragically, market-based pedagogical techniques are undermining this goal. “The market is not the right mechanism to supply police protection or fire protection, nor is it the right mechanism to supply public education.” Our schools were once places where students went to learn good habits of mind, good citizenship, and to develop good character. We need to revive the tradition which envisions quality public education as an indispensable component of a democratic society.

Lessons from School Reform

There are no shortcuts or silver bullets when it comes to education. However, all too often educational reformists insist that some new teaching methodology or organizational arrangement will transform the educational system dramatically for the better.

For instance, many reformists insist that government-run schools should be scrapped in favor of privately-managed schools. After all, government-run schools are monopolies, the reformists insist. Therefore, they exist to serve the interests of educators and administrators, not the students. Privately-operated schools, on the other hand, would introduce choice and accountability. Students would flee poor schools and flock to high-performing schools. In other words, choice and accountability create incentives for excellence, the reformers argue.

The idea of reforming education to offer greater choice and accountability sounds great in theory and it’s no wonder the reform movement garnered bipartisan support. Democrats viewed reform as an opportunity to reinvent government and Republicans saw it as a way of striking a blow against the teachers’ union.

The notion that market mechanisms will naturally solve social problems is appealing but false. In fact, deregulation of the financial markets precipitated the financial crisis of 2008. Similarly, privatizing education is not the answer to the ills of our educational

system. Competition, accountability, and choice seem like good ideas, but when they displace content and curriculum, educational standards tend to get dumbed down, not raised up.

The reform movement has become fixated on ideas that are antithetical to education. The obsession on raising test scores is a case in point. Standardized tests should be one measure of educational progress, but not an end in itself. Firing teachers and shuttering schools based solely on test results ignores all the other variables that contribute to education (parents, community, and the larger culture, for instance) while encouraging counterproductive and dubious practices, such as teaching to the test. Improving education will entail a return to more traditional educational practices as opposed to embracing the latest fads.

Hijacked!

In 1983, a blockbuster education report, *A Nation at Risk*, was released. The report warned that educational standards were slipping and America was at risk of falling behind competing nations in the educational race. The report did not discuss vouchers, charter schools, accountability, choice, or market-based reform. Instead, it made a straightforward case for raising standards, improving curriculums, and upgrading teacher preparation and textbooks. “Far from being a revolutionary document, the report was an impassioned plea to make our schools function in their core mission as academic institutions and to make our educational system live up to its ideals.”

A Nation at Risk encouraged states to develop substantive curriculum standards. However, attempts to craft strong standards inevitably invited controversy as culture warriors battled over what should be included in curriculums. Eventually, politicians and educators retreated from a standards-based approach to education and embraced an approach that centered on pedagogical methods.

Accountability and choice are the ideas animating the educational reform movement. Indeed, accountability and choice are at the center of President George W. Bush’s signature domestic initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In essence, NCLB “changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality.” With NCLB, student test scores became the sole measure used to evaluate teachers, administrators, and schools. Of course, NCLB had nothing to say about what content should be taught in schools.

NCLB had worthy aims. After all, raising test scores and improving educational performance are desirable goals. However, NCLB was bereft of an educational vision. Put simply, the central problem with NCLB is that standardized tests became the end all and be all of education while the idea of a substantive curriculum got shoved aside altogether.

The idea of developing a substantive national curriculum has fallen victim to the culture wars. The Federal government has provided states with money to develop their own curriculum content, but most state curriculums are vague and/or filled with windy rhetoric.

State standards are often vague and filled with platitudes because school boards and educational officials want to avoid provoking the culture warriors and generating controversy. NCLB codified this trend and test-based accountability became the law of the land, but states were left to craft the definitions of proficiency when it came to math and English. In effect, states were charged with devising tests and grading student progress on them.

However, NCLB was all sticks and few carrots. As a result, states had incentives to dumb down tests so that virtually all students would pass them. Nevertheless, both Democrats and Republicans embraced the reform agenda. In fact, even the Obama administration seems to have gotten on board the corporate-style reform bandwagon.

The approach of NCLB was entirely technocratic. Teaching techniques became more important than content. NCLB produced reams of data in the form of student test scores, but students spent more time learning how to take tests than they did acquiring genuine knowledge. At its core, NCLB was profoundly antithetical to real education.

America's political leaders believed the corporate management model could transform and improve the educational system. With the corporate model, everything is quantifiable. Unfortunately, the best teachers often impart lessons that are not easily measured.

Many of the corporate-style reforms were imposed by central planners with little or no background in education. The command-and-control methods they used ignored input from teachers and educational administrators. However, the corporate-style reformers viewed the educational bureaucracy as an impediment to reform. Dissent from teachers was viewed as a betrayal of student needs. The reformers followed three axioms: "1) Do it [reform] fast, 2) Do it deep, 3) Take no prisoners." Not surprisingly, reform efforts led to a record level of attrition among teachers."

Top-down efforts of reform are flawed. There are no simple solutions or magic bullets when it comes to education. "School reform is a slow, steady labor-intensive process." Capable administrators, dedicated teachers, and collaboration between all parties (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) and safe environments are what make educational systems successful. Ultimately, students, teachers, parents, and administrators all need to buy into reforms. In other words, successful reform will be bottom-up.

The top-down reform movement created a hostile school environment. Students disliked the emphasis on standardized tests, teachers felt ignored and disrespected by the reformists, and the high rate of teacher firings and school closings created a climate of fear and uncertainty. Put simply, “trust, not coercion, is a necessary precondition for school reform.”

Raising math and reading test scores became the ultimate tenets of the reform movement. As a result, many schools cut back or dropped art classes, music classes, physical education, history, civics, social sciences, and science classes.

Not surprisingly, because teachers’ jobs depended on standardized exams, they tended to teach to the tests. This distorted the educational process. First, teachers devoted inordinate time teaching students how to navigate the exams. And second, schools became adept at finding ways to artificially inflate test scores. For example, schools found ways to exclude (by transferring, suspending, or not enrolling) low-performing students.

NCLB: Measure and Punish

President George W. Bush believed the No Child Left Behind Act represented his signature domestic achievement. Bush insisted his reform bill would ensure that every child was proficient in math and reading. In particular, the centerpiece of NCLB was extensive standardized testing in grades three through eight. These would be tests devised by the states themselves, not Washington. In the aftermath of 9/11, NCLB was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

NCLB was modeled on the supposed success of educational reforms enacted in Bush’s home state of Texas when he was governor. Unfortunately, the apparent gains in Texas’ test scores were a mirage. In fact, “the state’s rising test scores and graduation rates were a direct result of the soaring dropout rate.” Put simply, low-performing students dropped out of the system, which made test scores in Texas seem better than they had been. Furthermore, Texas students did not improve on national tests such as the SAT or other college readiness tests. In other words, improved results of Texas’ state tests did not seem to transfer to other spheres, which called into question the validity of the state test results.

Proponents of NCLB earnestly believed that parents and students stuck with sub-par and failing schools would benefit from the option to choose to transfer to better schools. However, only a miniscule percentage of students pursued the transfer option. In short, NCLB’s remedies failed to catch on with students, parents, or teachers.

NCLB left it to the states to devise their own proficiency standards. States were then expected to grade their progress towards meeting those standards. Not surprisingly, states found ways to game the system in order not to keep federal funding. NCLB engendered a culture of testing that corrupted and undermined the educational system. In

fact, NCLB fed the interests of the testing industry. It also contributed to the “privatization of large chunks of the public education system.”

The worst part about NCLB is that it mandated an unattainable goal. Simply put, insisting that every student be proficient in math and reading by 2014 makes about as much sense as insisting that we can eliminate pollution or crime within a similar time frame. Only politicians make pie in the sky promises like this. Nevertheless, NCLB mandated that teachers be fired, principals sacked, and schools closed when they could not attain the impossible.

“As 2014 draws nearer, growing numbers of schools across the nation are approaching an abyss.” States and schools have been resorting to gimmickry in order to avoid the Draconian consequences for schools that fail to measure up to impossible standards. For instance, many states have lowered proficiency standards to make it easier to reach their targets. In fact, a growing number of public schools are being turned into charter schools or shuttered completely because of the unreasonable demands of NCLB. However, there is scant evidence that privatizing schools leads to tangible educational benefits or better schools.

NCLB has had many negative effects on education. Teachers have had little time to teach subjects other than math and reading. Students have been coached on how to do well on multiple choice questions, but they are often unable to write thoughtful essays. Indeed, many educators believe the test-centered approach of NCLB means children are “being trained, not educated.” Finally, teachers and administrators are being rewarded or punished by standards that are largely illusory as far as education goes.

NCLB is a well-intentioned but misconceived law based on false assumptions. NCLB assumed that schools could be shamed into improving. It also assumed that test scores and academic proficiency could rise year after year. Most egregiously, it assumed that high test scores are synonymous with education. All of these assumptions have proven wrong. Put simply, “good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools.”

Conclusion

Free markets provide many benefits. However, unfettered markets also undermine traditions, communal ties, and moral values. Deregulating the financial system did not lead to sustainable prosperity, as promised. Instead, deregulation led to an economic meltdown.

Similarly, entrusting education to entrepreneurs and business people is proving to be an unwise fad that is putting the education of our children at risk.

We need to improve our educational system. Indeed, education is essential to developing human potential and ensuring our society remains prosperous. Improving math and reading scores are essential, but we need to impart learning that goes well beyond these basic skills. More specifically, we need a rich and diverse curriculum that educates students so they can take responsibility for living in a self-governing society. Teaching students how to fill in bubbles on multiple-choice tests is the antithesis of a real education.

Restructuring and reform will only be successful if we have a genuine vision of what education should consist of. Newfangled management techniques and faddish pedagogical methods are no substitute for establishing a substantive curriculum. “The most durable way to improve schools is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers teach and students learn, rather than endlessly squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled.”

Charter schools siphon away the most motivated students while leaving public schools to deal with problem students. There is a role for charter schools, but they need to take on students that have been unable to succeed in traditional schools. Charter schools need to partner with public schools, not compete with them.

The business model is the wrong way to structure our schools. Additionally, any system that creates an atmosphere of mistrust and a high teacher and administrator attrition rate, will not serve the interests of students.

There is no silver bullet to improve our schools. However, a good educational system will start with a vision: what is it we want our children to learn so that they will grow up to be healthy, responsible, and productive citizens? Math and reading are important, but so are history, civics, science, art, music, and physical education. We need to get beyond the culture wars and develop a voluntary national curriculum. “Why is a curriculum important? It is a road map.” And in order to reach our destination, we need a clear plan. Of course, we need good teachers to teach the curriculum and inspire a love of learning. There is a place for standardized tests, but we need to remember that tests are just a snapshot. Our assessments should be as well-conceived as our curriculum.

Finally, we need to revitalize our commitment to public education. Free, universal, and accessible education has been a cornerstone of our democratic society. We cannot leave education to market forces. We must remember that investing in our public school system enriches our democratic society.

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- Page 8

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