

Neoliberal Standardization and Its Discontents: An Interview with Diane Ravitch

Christopher Bailey

Chris Bailey¹ (CB): You have worked in the U.S. Department of Education in various capacities since 1991. What attracted you to that institution? And what were some of your impressions of the education policies produced by that organization?

Diane Ravitch² (DR): I worked in the U.S. Department of Education from mid-1991 to January 1993. I was invited to be Assistant Secretary for Education Research by Lamar Alexander, who was Secretary of Education for President George H.W. Bush. I accepted his invitation because I was excited by the opportunity to learn about federal policy and Congress. During the time I was there, we pushed for voluntary national standards. We encouraged their creation by funding professional organizations of teachers and scholars. Standards were produced, but they didn't have much traction at the time because of the huge furor over the history standards.

CB: What was the rationale behind your initial support for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy under G.W. Bush, and why did you eventually leave your position in the U.S. Department of Education to become one of the more vocal critics of neoliberal education reform in the USA?

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² Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a historian of education. From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education and Counsellor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. As Assistant Secretary, she led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards.

DR: I left the U.S. Department of Education when the first Bush administration ended. I spent three years at the Brookings Institution, where I wrote a book about national standards, then went to New York University in 1995, where I have been ever since. During the 1990s and early 2000s, I was part of three conservative think tanks – the Manhattan Institute, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution. I was deeply engaged with the last two, and became convinced over time that No Child Left Behind was a failure. I also became convinced that charter schools had become a vehicle for privatization. I became increasingly alienated from the other board members and eventually became a full-fledged critic of these policies. I wrote a book about it called *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, which came out in 2010; I began researching and writing it in 2006 or 2007.

CB: What are the origins of the movement to privatize public education in the U.S.? Are there any important similarities or differences between Bush’s NCLB and the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative under Obama? How is public education currently funded under these programs?

DR: The privatization movement began with economist Milton Friedman’s proposal for vouchers in 1955. Vouchers were a favorite cause of the far-right fringe for many years. However, the public never voted for vouchers, largely because of opposition to funding religious schools. In the early 1990s, the rightwing turned to charters as its substitute for vouchers. Both were a way of promoting the transfer of public funds to private hands. The charter movement began with liberal support, especially from the Clinton administration. They were seen as innovative. But the right cheered them and eventually became their strongest supporters.

There is not much difference between NCLB and RTTT. They both promote high-stakes testing and privately managed charters. RTTT is actually worse, however, because it was sponsored by a Democratic president, our first Black president, who showed a strong preference for charters, not public schools. This gave cover to Democrats in many states to support the neoliberal agenda. RTTT also insisted upon the evaluation of teachers by the test scores of their students. Secretary of Education Duncan punished states that did not accept this strategy, even though it mislabelled teachers, demoralized teachers, and has not worked anywhere it has been applied. Duncan also heavily promoted the Common Core standards and funded tests for these standards. They

have been highly controversial, having attracted opposition from the right and the left, and from teachers.

CB: Can you signal some of the key features of the neoliberal education reform movement in the U.S.? How does this movement serve to undermine public education?

DR: The key features of neoliberal education reform are 1) a heavy reliance on standardized testing; 2) a willingness to eliminate collective bargaining and tenure; 3) a hostility to public education as such; 4) a preference for privately managed charter schools; 5) support for attacks on the teaching profession, including hostility to tenure and professionalism; 6) support for alternate routes into teaching like Teach for America, whose recruits have only five weeks of training and typically leave after 2-3 years in the classroom. This movement clearly will undermine public education by taking funding from public schools to support privately managed schools and cyber schools, as well as harming teacher professionalism.

CB: Lois Wiener and Michael Apple consider the current movement to privatize public education in the U.S. to be a part of a wider international neoliberal movement to restructure public education into a profit-oriented model. How would you characterize the charter/voucher school movement within the U.S.? What are the global implications of this reform movement?

DR: I don't know whether the movement in the U.S. is international in scope. It might be. But I have no doubt that the driving force behind it is to transition to a profit-making model. This has occurred in many of our states, where for-profit organizations and individuals are siphoning off millions of dollars from public schools. In many places, public schools are starved of resources, stripped of programs, while charter schools have small classes and all the programs that were eliminated in public schools. The cybercharters are especially profitable but the quality of education provided by computer is very poor. Nonetheless, these companies (like K12 Inc.) are profitable.

CB: An essential part of the education reform movements' rhetoric has been the demonization of the public education system and teachers' unions. Is there any merit to these accusations? Why do you think teachers' unions are being blamed?

DR: There is no merit to the accusations made about either public education or the unions. These accusations are part of the neoliberal effort to destroy public education and to leave teachers powerless.

CB: In past articles you've suggested several education reforms to combat chronic problems within public education in the U.S. How can we fight racial segregation and class stratification via progressive education reform? Do reforms need to extend beyond curriculum and classroom conditions? Would this also require progressive reforms to healthcare and welfare?

DR: The leadership to end racial segregation must come from the federal government and state governments. There will be no progressive reforms without progressive leadership. Unfortunately, our current leadership is entirely neoliberal, not only in the federal government but in usually progressive states like New York and Connecticut, whose governors are indistinguishable from conservative Republicans on education issues. Our Secretary of Education Arne Duncan bemoans racial segregation, yet hails charter schools that are completely segregated without seeing any contradiction. I have often wondered why he didn't take the \$5 billion devoted to Race to the Top and award it to districts that promoted desegregation. As I wrote in my last book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, true reform must involve not only the schools but government and social policy. That is not happening, but I think it must happen.

CB: In light of some recent examples of fight back against the education reform movement by teachers unions, students and community members in Chicago, L.A. and Wisconsin, what are your thoughts regarding the viability of mounting popular challenges to the charter/voucher movement?

DR: I see a growing movement against high stakes testing and privatization. The two are intertwined. The Common Core is at the heart of the neoliberal agenda because it raises standards so high that it generates failure. The tests have passing marks so high that they are designed to fail most students. I believe the standards and tests were designed to generate failure, thereby encouraging people to seek alternatives to the public schools. At the same time, the Common Core creates huge profits for the testing industry and the tech industry, because all testing must be done online, requiring the expenditure of billions of dollars on bandwidth and new tablets and computers.

Parents and educators are waking up to the destructive wrecking ball aimed at their children, their schools, and their communities. There are more parents opting out, more teachers and administrators speaking out. I believe that this movement will grow and that neoliberal advocates will

be exposed for what they are: a tiny elite seeking to privatize our schools and profit from them. Everything they have promoted as “reform” has failed. You can’t fail your way to success.

CB: Given the vast amount of corporate funding and resources behind the charter/voucher movement, what are some concrete strategies that supporters of public education could employ to fight back?

DR: The corporate and philanthropic funding is huge, but the numbers of those pushing neoliberalism are small. If we are still a democracy, and I believe and hope we are, those fighting this agenda must organize and educate the public. That is what we are best at: public education. If parents, teachers, and activists grow their movement, they – we – will win. Our numbers are vast. Their numbers are puny. I have often thought that if they called a meeting of all the so-called reformers, they might convene 25,000 people, maybe less – and most of them would be employees of the movement itself. We have millions of teachers and administrators, and tens of millions of parents. Our great strength are students and parents. They can speak out and no one can fire them. They work for our movement without being paid because they work from conviction, not with hope of profit. Conviction will triumph because we will outlive them and outlast them. If their profits dry up, they will go away. We will not.