

Book Review: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*

Ben King

University of Mary Hardin Baylor
900 College Street, Box 8017
Belton, TX 76513
USA

Christie Bledsoe, Ed.D.

University of Mary Hardin Baylor
900 College Street, Box 8017
Belton, TX 76513
USA

In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch (2010) boldly described her own change of opinion as she recounted the damage testing has caused in public schools. She outlined the flaws of current trends in public school reform and proposed steps to help reformers be more effective. Ravitch carefully analyzed popular reform ideas such as high-stakes testing, accountability, charter schools, and the privatization of public schools. As a former education advisor for the George H. W. Bush administration, Ravitch once supported these ideas she now describes as misguided, inept, and destructive. The overemphasized high stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum and damaged public schools. Ravitch cited many examples to illustrate a need to repair the public education system with incremental, practical steps grounded in curriculum, instruction, school leadership, and community support. Her book includes insightful perspective for administrators, legislators, and parents on education and accountability.

Educational and governmental leaders attempted to address problems in education with reforms directly related to the accountability frenzy fostered by NCLB. Throughout *The Death and Life*, Ravitch (2010) lamented the impact of these decisions. In fact, Ravitch condemned poor leadership as a major reason for the current state of public education. Repeatedly, Ravitch (2010) provided examples of leaders approving shortcuts focused on “structural changes and accountability” (p. 16), instead of building students’ knowledge, skills, and intellectual ability. President Bush’s No Child Left Behind program lacked “any reference to what students should learn,” (p.16) failed to require curriculum or raise standards, and had “nothing at all to do with the substance of learning” (p. 16). Ravitch believed NCLB focused too heavily on making schools accountable for test scores, as if accountability were the key to improving education. As Ravitch continually asserted, effective reform should rely on improving curriculum, the delivery of curriculum, school leadership, and community support. NCLB did not improve any such factors. Instead, NCLB overemphasized the measurement of annual test scores in only reading and math, rewarded schools with high test scores, and punished schools with low test scores.

Along with exposing many forms of poor educational leadership, Ravitch also criticized the popular idea of privatizing education and allowing corporate leaders to control education reform and policy. She vehemently condemned the idea of privatizing education and asserted those in favor of privatizing education “assume that if children are attending privately managed schools, and if teachers and principals are recruited from non-traditional backgrounds, then student achievement will improve dramatically” (p. 220). Privatizing schools would debilitate local communities and hurt American democracy. Ravitch contended privatizing schools would not mean all schools would suddenly become first-rate institutions. In fact, like it does in the private sector, the market naturally produces “winners and losers,” or, in the case of education, exceptional schools, terrible schools, and schools that fall somewhere in between. On some points, Ravitch overstated the benefits of “neighborhood” schools and failed to recognize benefits of private schools for the community.

It is a stretch to contend privatizing education would somehow damage American democracy. One could also argue that because public schools are highly regulated by the state and federal government, public schools actually depress democratic thinking and ideals. Ravitch argued a competitive market would create good and bad schools, but the current system also produces good and bad schools. Ravitch may be right. Privatizing education may be a bad idea, but Ravitch’s reasons are not compelling.

Ravitch was critical of privatizing education, thus she certainly disapproved of the incredible influence leaders of philanthropic foundations have on education reform. Such leaders include Bill and Melinda Gates (The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and Eli and Eythe Broad (The Broad Foundation). The Gates and the Broads have pumped billions of dollars in grants and investments into public school reform, with only mixed results to show. Very few people have been critical of the Gates, Broads, or other similar leaders because of their financial power and influence. Ravitch was critical because these leaders generally want schools to operate more like private businesses and champion reform ideas without truly understanding the field of education.

Particularly interesting was Ravitch's analysis of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Ravitch deftly indicated Bill Gates only followed research that supported his ideas, failing to understand drawbacks and difficulties of certain reform ideas. Ravitch identified Gates failures with the small school movement exemplifying the fact there is no singular reform that will automatically solve big problems in education. Ravitch noted Gates is currently investing money in "performance-based teacher pay programs; creating data systems; supporting advocacy work; promoting national standards and tests; and finding ways for schools districts to measure teacher effectiveness and the fire ineffective teachers" (p. 211). Ravitch made compelling arguments against Gates and other foundation leaders. However, Ravitch did not state such leaders should not invest in education. Ravitch simply argued leaders must be more knowledgeable about the complexities of education reform and must be more objective in conducting and consuming research.

Throughout *The Death and Life*, Ravitch criticized educational and governmental leaders and vilified popular public school reform strategies. Originally, Ravitch was a major supporter of NCLB, testing and accountability, and school choice, so she was self-critical. Ravitch lacked "doubt and skepticism" of "panaceas" and "miracle cures" for education when backing the mandates and inherent ideologies of NCLB. However, within the first few pages of *The Death and Life*, Ravitch made it clear she was changing her stance regarding NCLB, testing, accountability, school choice, and the like.

Ravitch's ideological transformation, or flip-flopping, from a staunch supporter of the accountability measures mandated by NCLB to now staunch critic may give readers an initial pause for concern. Such a transformation seems convenient and pretentious, especially when so many politicians, media members, and professional critics flip-flop for all the wrong reasons (votes, ratings, popularity, and money). However, Ravitch's flip-flopping appears to be the result of genuine re-thinking for the sake of education. Ravitch communicated that the best and most "durable way to improve schools is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve conditions in which teachers work and children learn, rather than endlessly squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled" (p. 225). Choosing to improve the public school system in this way will not be an easy or quick process but will lead to a better, more effective public school system.

References

Ravitch, D. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. New York, New York: Basic Books.