The release of Diane Ravitch’s new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, caused quite a stir in the education community because in it Ravitch does an about-face, criticizing the education policies she had fully supported over the years, including when she served as assistant secretary of education and counselor to Education Secretary Lamar Alexander from 1991 to 1993. Today, Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, speaks out against charter schools, standardized testing, performance pay, and narrowing the curriculum, among other “reform” methods.

Taking time out during her nationwide tour, Ravitch spoke to us about her take on school improvement efforts. Here’s what she had to say.

**Principal magazine:** What initially caused you to question the reform strategies you once embraced such as charter schools, vouchers, performance pay, and standardized testing? Why do you no longer believe these methods are effective in reforming schools?

**Diane Ravitch:** As I explain in my book, I supported these strategies in the hope that competition would improve performance for students, teachers, and schools. After the passage of No Child Left Behind, I saw many of these ideas become reality, and I realized that they did not have the intended result, at least not the ones I had hoped for.

I saw schools devoting far too much time and money to test preparation and testing; I saw the curriculum narrowed so that many students, especially in inner cities, were getting less time for history, geography, civics, foreign language, and the arts. The only thing that counted was basic skills, and that is not a good education all by itself. I also realized that charter schools had become, in many places, a way of privatizing public education. That was never my expectation.

What specific improvements do you believe are necessary to strengthen schools?

Current policies are leading to an erosion of professionalism by emphasizing the recruitment of superintendents, principals, and teachers who have no professional training. I think we need to strengthen the profession and make it more professional, not dismantle it.

I also believe that school improvement must go hand in hand with improvement in the lives of children. Child poverty rates are above 20 percent and climbing. This effects school performance negatively and harms children’s physical and emotional development.

You’ve explained what hasn’t worked; when it comes to raising achievement and strengthening schools, what strategies do you believe have worked over the years?

In brief, excellent teachers; principals who are master teachers, ready to help new teachers; knowledgeable superintendents; a strong and balanced curriculum, so that every child has the opportunity to study history, geography, civics, science, literature, and the arts. If we narrow schooling only to testing, many children will lose interest in schooling.

Although you do not fully support standardized testing, in your book you write that you don’t wish to abolish it altogether. What do you believe are alternative methods to measure student achievement?

Testing should be used diagnostically, not for punishments and rewards. Testing is like a thermometer; it should be used periodically to check up on how students are doing and to identify what they need and then to provide help. It is now being used far too much for rewards and punishments, both for students and teachers. The quality of student work may be judged by many other measures, including projects, written work, participation in science fairs and history day, and other evidence of enthusiastic engagement in learning.

How much do you think standardized test scores should weigh in measuring student achievement?

That’s a judgment call. I would hate to see it written into law or mandated by officials. Teachers should have the ultimate decision-making power about student progress. I note that in Finland, which is now much discussed, students seldom take tests. We should continue...
to seek other ways—aside from standardized tests—to measure student progress so that the measures do not corrupt the act of learning.

In your book, you write, “Our schools will not improve if we continually reorganize their structure and management without regard to their essential purpose.” How important is constancy of leadership and how does this concept stack up against the current reform efforts?

Stability is very important for schools, just as it is for families and communities. Constant churn makes it difficult for students and teachers to exert their best efforts and to build a community of learners. These days, the “reform” movement seems to believe that American education is so terrible that it must be torn apart and reorganized, something that is called “creative destruction.” Turmoil is harmful to the process of teaching and learning. It is hard for me to understand why anyone thinks this is “creative.” Usually it is just destruction and upheaval by poorly informed noneducators, leading to demoralization of teachers and principals.

On a related note, what do you believe is lost and gained by a school structure that is continually reorganizing the management?

What is lost is a sense of community, a social network built up over the years by a stable and experienced staff. It is hard for me to guess what is gained by continually reorganizing management of the schools. If the public got together to support public education, it might be harder for noneducators to swoop in and take charge and impose half-baked schemes. Change comes slowly and incrementally, and that is of course frustrating.

The U.S. Department of Education had proposed that principals, like teachers, be evaluated as “effective” or “highly effective” based on a year or more of student academic growth across all subgroups. Do you agree with this method of evaluation?

No, this is a ridiculous way to evaluate teachers and principals. This is a formula to demoralize public school educators and hasten the privatization of the public schools. This is NCLB on steroids. We must all try to figure out how the federal government managed to take control of our nation’s schools while no one was paying attention.

In your experience, what are the factors that should be considered when evaluating school leaders? School leaders should have experience as classroom teachers because evaluating teachers is one of their most important responsibilities. They should be evaluated by wise and experienced superintendents who regularly oversee the physical and academic climate of their schools. They should be evaluated by attention to the graduation rate and the retention rate of their school. They should be evaluated by their ability to recruit and retain good teachers. If there is high teacher turnover or high student turnover, that’s a trouble sign. They should be responsible for maintaining a full and balanced curriculum of studies, providing opportunities for all students to engage in the arts, sciences, foreign languages, and other subjects. Their schools should be spotlessly clean, cheerful, and welcoming, while exuding a seriousness of purpose about learning.

What do you believe is the role of principals in school reform?

I would prefer to use the term “improvement” rather than “reform.” These days, reform has become synonymous with competition, charters, performance pay, and other schemes imported unthinkingly from the business world. Education thrives on collaboration, mutual support, and inspiration.

The role of the principal is to guide, protect, lead, and inspire his or her staff, and in turn to make sure that the students have the resources, curriculum, and programs they need. It is a very demanding and difficult job that requires a leader who can simultaneously work harmoniously with parents, teachers, other staff, and children. The idea that a noneducator can be trained in a year or two to step into this demanding job is one of the misguided innovations of our time. Principals should have a history as an excellent teacher so they can help their teachers and evaluate them appropriately by observation and regular engagement. Being an elementary school principal is one of the most demanding tasks in our society; it is not a job for amateurs.

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