



## Book Review

### Reign of Error:

# The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools by Diane Ravitch

By Robert Rader  
Executive Director, CABE

The first half of Diane Ravitch's newest book seems to read, are you with us or against us? Are you for reform or against it? Are you in favor of our traditional relationships with unions, individual teachers and your community or do you want to see them totally upended?

Problem is, as those on school boards know, the issues facing public education are rarely black or white. The shades of gray (I would guess more than 50 of them) color one's perspective and views on many of these issues that are faced by boards.

But, the second half of the book provides sometimes workable, sometimes pie-in-the-sky solutions to many of the issues facing public education.

This is a very interesting, though long, book. For new board members, it provides a history of the reform movement and while you may not agree with everything Ravitch says, it is thoughtful, comprehensive and provides evidence for the case she is making—something she would argue the “reformers” do not. It is written much like Ravitch speaks: rapid fire, authoritative and credible.

Those who read her earlier book, *Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, will find plenty of new things to think about as they ponder the future of public education.

Ravitch sets the context for reform and discussing the arguments of reformers, who include President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan; ex-Washington D.C. Chancellor and current head of Students First Michelle Rhee and former Florida Governor and creator of the Foundation for Excellence in Education Jeb

Bush; Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC); foundations including Gates, Milliken, Walton and Broad; and for-profit providers of educational services.

She characterizes the reform movement as being “determined to cut costs and maximize competition among schools and among teachers. It seeks to eliminate the geographically based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market-based system of school choice—one that includes traditional public schools, privately managed charter schools, religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools, and for-profit vendors of instruction. Lacking any geographic boundaries, these schools would compete for customers.”

Many chapters set out her concerns with two simple statements, the Claim by Reformers and the Reality, which is, in her opinion, often quite different.

For example, in a chapter entitled “Why Merit Pay Fails”, the Claim is that “Merit pay will improve achievement.” The Reality: Merit pay has never improved achievement.” Her “solutions” chapters also start with two-sentence summaries of her thinking.

The chapters go into some depth on many critical education issues, including: test scores; the achievement gap, international test scores, high school graduation results; parent trigger legislation; vouchers; and teachers' tenure and seniority.

One thing I really appreciate about the book is the solutions she proposes. It's long been my feeling that one of the reasons the reform movement has grown is that the traditional educational groups have really not

(continued on back)

proposed good solutions (except for more resources) for troubled school districts, especially those in our cities. Nature (and politics) abhors a vacuum and that's what we had. For those parents whose children went to schools that provided (and may still provide) subpar education, is it any wonder that they have, in many cases flocked to charters or pushed for vouchers? If you were a parent in such a situation, wouldn't you do the same for your child?

One of the most interesting issues that Ravitch discusses is poverty. She makes the strong argument that we must deal with the issues in education and society at same time. Reformers may be right that poverty is not an excuse, but "it is a harsh reality." She calls for deep thinking on the issues of poverty as they so affect student achievement.

Ravitch's thoughtful and evidence-based solutions go beyond what the schools alone can do, such as:

- providing good prenatal care;
- making "high-quality early childhood education available to all children" with well-prepared teachers;
- ensuring every school has "a full, balanced, and rich curriculum", including the subjects that were not been tested under NCLB and RTTT (arts, science, history, civics, foreign language and physical education) and there must be other indicators of what makes a good school, besides high test scores;
- banning for-profit charters and charter chains and ensure that charter schools collaborate with public schools for a better education for all students;
- providing the wraparound services that many students so desperately need (including health-care, summer- and after-school enrichment programs) and parent education to support the other services,
- measuring knowledge with what students know and can do, rather than with high-stakes assessments;
- ensuring that teachers, principals, and superintendents are professional educators;
- governing districts through elected school boards or by boards in large cities "appointed for a set term by more than one elected official." In other words, it should appointed boards should not be appointed solely by the mayor; and,
- defining public education as "a public responsibility, not a consumer good".

Throughout the book she argues that reformers' solutions will not lead to better outcomes for our students. She states that the purpose of public education is not necessarily to make students college-ready, it is to prepare them to be good citizens. Another purpose is to provide equal educational opportunities for all students and she believes that the charter school movement might, instead, create a dual system of education for our youngsters.

She believes that under the "present setup, local school boards are nearly irrelevant" as so many decisions are made in Washington, D.C. She touts the benefits of local boards of education, including the idea that they "are a check and balance against concentrated power in one person or agency." She states that since public schools need public support and "should be governed by those who are willing to work diligently to improve them and by those who have the greatest stake in the success of the children and the community."

## My Takeaway

I believe that, as in many real life situations, every community, state and nation will have to determine what is best for them among the black and white, as well as gray, solutions to the problems of public education—to the extent that they are permitted to do so. With the momentum of the accountability, school choice and charter schools train roaring down the federal and state tracks, local boards, as well as state associations and NSBA must think through the consequences of their decisions and how they will respond to Ravitch's warning.

It is good that Diane Ravitch makes her arguments so passionately. I know she cares deeply about the future of public education. She questioned what CAFE was doing when we joined a coalition with reform groups. And, those of us thinking about the future of boards of education must sit up and pay careful attention.

Her book is a very passionate discussion of, as Paul Harvey used to say, "the other side of the story."

It is one that board members, superintendents and even reformers should carefully analyze to determine the future of public education.