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WHERE TESTS FAIL

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Reform of the Reform

How Not to Fix Our Schools

Jackson Lears

Like journalists praising war from the safety of their keyboards, economists celebrate the insecurities of entrepreneurship from a comfortable distance. The prototype was the Harvard economist Joseph Schumpeter. In the bucolic solitude of his Connecticut estate, he coined the term “creative destruction” to refer to the role of entrepreneurial innovation in capitalist development: the inevitable mass firings and factory closings that accompanied the adoption of labor-saving technology. Schumpeter was not the first to notice capitalism’s destructive impact—critics from Marx to Heidegger had done so before him—but he was the first to call it “creative.”

This adjective accounts for the phrase’s ubiquity at our current historical moment. Everyone wants to be creative, especially our destroyers. Free-market ideologues celebrate the freewheeling entrepreneur and dismiss any concern about the social ravages of unregulated capital. Worried about the catastrophic impact of plant closings? It can’t be helped—protracted joblessness, ruined families, and abandoned communities are the necessary price of progress. Capital must be free to flow where the investment opportunities are; any constraints on it obstruct the creative entrepreneurship that drags us, despite our doubts, into a better future.

“Creative destruction” is often awkwardly allied with techno-determinism—the belief that “technology” is reshaping our society and there is nothing human beings can do about it. Hence the headline in *InformationWeek* reporting the takeover of the *Washington Post* by Amazon.com’s CEO,

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Jeff Bezos: “Creative Destruction of Internet Age: Unstoppable.” Somehow this bleak vision is conveyed in a rhetoric of dizzying personal possibilities. It remains to be seen how creative anyone can be in a world where fundamental changes are engineered by (allegedly) impersonal forces. The entrepreneurial notion of creativity is confined to half a dozen techno-visionaries (such as Bezos and Steve Jobs) and defined in narrowly monetary terms, while the destruction that so often accompanies it is wide, deep, and real. “Creative destruction” is the perfect euphemism for our neo-liberal moment. Schumpeter must be smiling, somewhere.

Schumpeter’s most influential American apostle is Clayton Christensen, a management theorist at the Harvard Business School. Like any good theorist he has reformulated the

master’s message, challenging Schumpeter’s prediction that entrepreneurial innovation would be bureaucratically organized in corporations. “What happened in Japan is exactly what Schumpeter envisioned,” said Christensen. “But here, folks just leave—

they pick up venture capital on the way out, and they start new disruptive corporations.” This is a characteristic Americanization of a European thinker. Note the pseudo-populist description of investors withdrawing capital—“folks just leave”—and the further turn given the euphemism: “destruction” becomes the schoolboyish “disruption.”

Policymakers and business gurus have endowed the word “disruption” with almost fetishlike power in recent years. And Christensen himself has pioneered the application of “disruption theory” to social institutions outside the market: government agencies, public-health organizations, schools. The Americanization and expansion of Schumpeter’s concept—the transformation of creative destruction in the economic sphere to creative disruption everywhere—is another symptom of our most serious social malady: the hollowing out of the public sphere, the reduction of non-market institutions to market-driven “profit centers,” the monetization of everything.

Reign of Error The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools

Diane Ravitch
Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.95, 352 pp.

Nowhere is this sickness more apparent than in the world of education, where “reformers” like Michelle Rhee and Joel Klein have promoted privatization in the guise of the pursuit of excellence. The consequences have been disruption that is anything but creative.

The most clear-headed and influential critic of privatization is Diane Ravitch, who has earned a reputation as an independent thinker. Refusing to embrace the formulas of left and right, she attacks politically correct speech codes as intelligently as she criticizes the free-market faith in competition. She has also been willing to change her mind in public: at one time an advocate of standardized testing, she is now a skeptic. And this skepticism animates her broader critique in *Reign of Error*, a book that dispels the clouds of reform rhetoric to reveal the destructiveness of the privatization agenda.

Since the days of Horace Mann in the 1840s, school reformers have deployed a morally charged rhetoric of apocalypse and utopia, repeatedly resorting to the jeremiad form: We are in crisis, they say, and only our schools can save us. What we are to be saved from varies from one decade to another—restive factory workers in Mann’s era; strange new immigrants in the early 1900s; the Russians, the Japanese, the Chinese, or whoever the rival of the moment may be in more recent years. Whatever their immediate concern, school reformers have tended to put all their hope in institutions that can never operate independently of the constraints imposed by the surrounding social order. When the schools fail to transform the society, as they inevitably do, disappointment and anger lead eventually to more demands for educational transformation.

What’s left out of these debates is as important as what’s left in. Complaining about failing schools is a way of avoiding the structural issues of systemic poverty, inequality, and racial segregation. Celebrating better schools as a panacea is a way of not mentioning unmentionable policies that might challenge existing power arrangements. Never have these ideological exclusions been clearer than in our contemporary neoliberal moment.

Since the early 1980s, when a report titled *A Nation at Risk* warned that the United States was not educating “the labor force of the twentieth century,” reformers have displayed an increasingly relentless insistence on evaluating education entirely in terms of its economic utility. Education, they assume, is a product like any other in the marketplace: schools can deliver it efficiently or not, and students or their parents (if the students are too young) get to decide whether the school is meeting their needs—that is, whether it’s providing

them with marketable skills. President Obama’s proposal to require universities to publish the average incomes of their graduates—so students and their parents can make an informed consumer choice—is a characteristic example of this mentality. Nineteenth-century school reformers aimed to promote citizenship; twenty-first-century reformers want to empower entrepreneurship. The conquest of educational discourse by market models is nearly complete.

In reasserting the claims of public education, Ravitch is swimming against a strong current of conventional wisdom. Privatization is a bipartisan cause, though the word itself is rarely mentioned. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind program and Obama’s Race to the Top, along with most of the mainstream media, have embraced the corporate reformers’ worldview in all its bullet-point banality. This view depends on a series of assertions, from general assumptions to specific recommendations. Here are the key points: Education at all levels is about training students how

to succeed in a globalized economy; declining test scores and graduation rates demonstrate that schools are failing our children; poverty is just an excuse for failing schools, and great teachers by themselves can counteract its effects; teachers unions protect mediocre teachers through outdated policies like tenure; standardized tests (sold by various companies in the education-industrial complex) should be used to evaluate teachers as well as students, and teachers whose students’ scores fail to rise should be fired; a nationwide network of privately run (but publicly funded) charter schools should be encouraged as an alternative to public schools. This last is another arena of consumer choice for beleaguered parents oppressed by the “public-school monopoly.” What could be more American than that?

In education as in other areas of American life, privatization constitutes a powerful agenda, supported by billions of private (and increasingly public) dollars. Ravitch challenges it at every point. She begins by reminding us of what the corporate reformers don’t talk about: the catastrophic impact of budget cuts, child poverty, racial segregation, bloated budgets for testing, increased class size, scripted curricula, teachers’ loss of professional autonomy, the absence of special-needs children and nonnative English speakers from charter schools, and the diversion of public funds to pay dividends to charter-school investors. As in health care and the prison system, what is called privatization is really a euphemism for crony capitalism—plutocrats supping at the public trough.

But Ravitch knows that in order to take on the privatizers, argument alone is not enough. She first has to challenge them on their own ground: numbers. So she starts out with a necessary but narrow case. She refutes the privatizers’

Nineteenth-century school reformers aimed to promote citizenship; twenty-first-century reformers want to empower entrepreneurship. The conquest of educational discourse by market models is nearly complete.

first premise, that statistics show schools in decline, by citing a no-stakes federal test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress—the kind of test you can't prepare for and one that involves neither punishment nor reward for your performance. NAEP scores are at an all-time high for white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students. High-school graduation rates and college admissions are also at an all-time high. All this is worth mentioning, as a counterweight to the privatizers' hysteria, though it doesn't really address the meaning of a high-school diploma in an era when kids can get into college without knowing how to put a sentence together or what the Bill of Rights is. Graduation rates and college admissions are simply inadequate as measures of educational quality.

To be sure, statistics can sometimes confirm the consequences of long-term economic trends. Ravitch observes that the racial achievement gap has narrowed since the 1970s, while the income achievement gap has widened. This is hardly a surprising outcome, given the rising economic inequality of the past several decades, but it is useful in calling attention to what goes on outside the classroom—an area largely ignored by reformers.

Ravitch is on her firmest ground when she begins to push beyond the numbers. Addressing the performance of U.S. students on international tests, an obsessive concern of reformers, Ravitch at first notes that our scores have been improving, and that in tests that measure independent thinking (one wonders how), the home team blows everybody else off the charts. According to the education critic Keith Baker, whom Ravitch quotes, the best traditions in American education involve “ambition, inquisitiveness, independence, and perhaps most important, the absence of a fixation on testing and test scores.” So why copy the “rote systems” of China and Japan—especially when there is simply no association between test scores and the economic success of a nation?

Nor is there any relation between college-graduation rates and national economic health. Ravitch takes dead aim at the reformers' mindless chant of “college for all”—which exaggerates the cash value of a college degree while reducing its personal meaning to a mere meal ticket. Obsessive college boosterism doesn't provide the right sort of encouragement for discouraged students, who are not going to college anyway. Meanwhile, despite reformers' handwringing, the U.S. college graduation rate has increased steadily since 1980

across all ethnicities. The current rate of 41 percent puts the United States alongside France and well above Germany's 26 percent. But Germany has prospered because, as Ravitch writes, “it has taken care not to outsource its major industries to low-wage nations.” The Germans have preserved strong unions, master-apprentice training, and a solid manufacturing base. The United States, meanwhile, has shut down its shop classes and turned to preparing students for a world where everyone will hold a college degree, wear a white collar, and stare at a screen. Some will stare more creatively—that is, profitably—and rise in the world. This is the future according to Bill Gates, himself a college dropout, and the

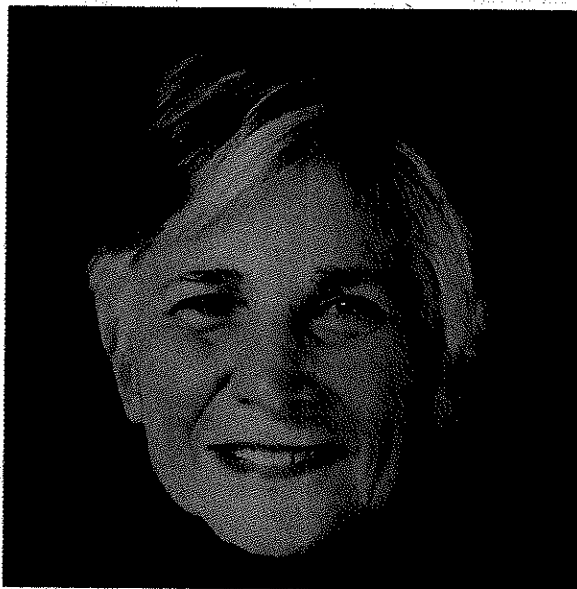
other billionaires backing school reform, the technocratic fantasy that powers the “college for all” creed. The reformers' belief that “our economy will suffer unless we have the highest college graduation rate in the world,” Ravitch concludes, is simply not borne out by any available evidence.

By challenging the reformers' economic case for college, Ravitch raises real questions about the utilitarian assumptions underlying the reform agenda. Policymakers have oversold the economic benefits of a college education “and lost sight of the value of education for personal, civic, aesthetic, and social purposes.” Mild words, but Ravitch's understatement makes a better

case for the humanities—at all levels—than many windier books have done. There are, she writes, “other ways of thinking about higher education” than the market-utilitarian way.

Going to a college or university is about more than acquiring job skills. It is a time to study different subjects and fields in depth; to explore one's interests and to give full range to one's curiosity about ideas; to study under the tutelage of scholars who have devoted their lives to their field. It is a time to develop one's intellectual and cultural life. It is a time to gain the political, historical, and economic understanding that was not contained in high school textbooks, to explore issues that were once thought settled, to acquire and exercise the critical perspective that prepares people to become actively involved in civic life and democratic politics. All these may be familiar ideas but they bear repeating, especially in Ravitch's unpretentious prose.

Much of *Reign of Error* is devoted to setting up reformers' myths and then knocking them down with statistical and historical evidence. The formula is a little repetitive, but it gets the job done. Sometimes it's risibly easy, as in the myth that “poverty is an excuse for ineffective teaching and failing schools”—which Ravitch buries in a mountain of studies, all



Diane Ravitch

THE MOTH

There is one now,
on the screen door,
his chalky wings a blur,
wanting in, wanting in.
A neighbor arrives,
headlights and the thump of a car door.
The voices slip through the geometry of lights
thrown down by front windows and a few words
break through more clearly than others,
as we smell the hint of a cigarette.

This warm weather begins at dawn,
and lasts long after sundown.
We fought against it,
sitting beside the air conditioner all day,
but now we have this quiet vigil,
nothing more to be done.

Everything is open,
the windows, the front door
with its screened darkness.
When a dog passes
we hear the tinkle of its collar tags.

Above the old orange tree in the garden
the silhouette of the mountain rises up and then the stars
and the satellites take over. The tiny points that move
look exactly like the ones that don't,
silence followed by silence.

The moth climbs, flies in place,
and climbs yet more.
We sit quiet, and the house around us
is still, and of all the living things he
is the most urgent, restlessly on his way
with the earth toward morning.

—Michael Cadnum

*Michael Cadnum lives in Albany, California. His thirty-fifth book, the novel *Seize the Storm*, will be published in 2012 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

showing that “poverty is highly correlated with low academic achievement.” Who could have doubted this, except right-wing ideologues? The mere fact that the argument has to be made is testimony to how far we have strayed from the assumptions guiding mid-century social-welfare policy, and how deeply our political culture has been saturated in the assumptions of free-market fundamentalism.

Many of the reform myths focus on the need to make teachers as frightened of losing their jobs as most other Americans are. A *Newsweek* cover showed a classroom blackboard with the repeated chalk message “We must fire bad teachers.” Michelle Rhee, in the fawning film documentary *Waiting for “Superman,”* seemed to derive an almost erotic charge from the prospect of firing a teacher on camera. The flip side of this fetish is the notion that test scores reveal the “value added” by the teacher to a child’s performance: according to the statistician William Sanders, three effective teachers in a row could close the achievement gap. Rhee and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have repeated that formula endlessly. The value-added concept overlooks parents and the rest of the child’s world outside the classroom; it also rests on a fundamental category mistake. “Value-added” works as a measure of agricultural productivity but not of children’s intellectual growth. As Ravitch observes, “Children are not crops. They are not empty vessels waiting to be filled by a teacher.” Value-added assessment of teachers based on standardized test scores is bad science—inaccurate, unstable, unreliable. It also penalizes teachers with the most difficult assignments: children with cognitive disabilities or behavioral problems and children for whom English is a second language.

According to Ravitch, reformers simply do not understand teachers because they cannot imagine anyone doing anything without a financial incentive. So they constantly try to promote merit-pay schemes, overlooking abundant historical evidence that merit pay neither motivates teachers nor improves student performance. Reformers’ “belief in the magical power of money is unbounded,” Ravitch writes. “Their belief in the importance of evidence is not.” So it doesn’t matter to them that there is no evidence that schools improve when tenure and seniority are abolished. Unionized teachers are no bar to high student achievement (as in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut) or to low achievement (as in the District of Columbia and other high-poverty urban districts). The lowest achievement is in the South, where there are no unions. As for tenure, it is simply due process applied to questions of firing, and is rooted in the necessity of protecting academic freedom in the classroom. Without tenure, says Ravitch, teachers would be subject to firing for assigning *Huckleberry Finn* or *Harry Potter*. Abolishing it is a prescription for banality.

The jewel in the reform movement’s tiara is supposedly the charter school—an umbrella term covering an array of choices: for-profit and nonprofit, chain-store style or locally owned, online or brick-and-mortar. Amid the variety, the

dominant drift in charter-school organization is toward the corporate chain model. Whatever their structure, charter schools provide tax-supported alternatives to (allegedly) failing public schools. Despite the fanfare surrounding them, their success has been mixed. "Charter schools run the gamut from excellent to awful and are, on average, no more innovative or successful than public schools," Ravitch writes. Whether they represent a good use of public funds remains an open question. Ravitch provides grounds for skepticism.

Many charter schools are perfect embodiments of crony capitalism: privately run, publicly funded. Charter schools claim to be public when getting money from the state, and claim to be private when being sued by fired teachers or threatened with an audit by the state comptroller. Most charter schools are exempt from state laws requiring competitive bids. This can lead to embarrassing revelations: a nonprofit charter chain called Great Hearts, under contract with the state of Arizona, purchased \$1 million worth of textbooks from a company owned by a member of the state charter board. One begins to suspect that the public-private distinction is merely a convenient fiction meant to serve ideological needs. Certainly the charter school movement has been heavily funded by reactionary lobbyists. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—the group behind the right-wing takeover of statehouses in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio—has also promoted the Next Generation

Charter Schools Act in many state legislatures. This act allows governors to appoint a board to authorize charter schools and override local school boards. It is the Walmartization of American education, Ravitch warns, with the same hollowing-out effect on local communities. Corporate charter schools are putting Catholic schools out of business and draining money from public schools. As Ravitch asks, "If charter schools are not more successful on average than the public schools they replace, what is accomplished by demolishing public education?" The answer, of course, is the enrichment of investors and the advancement of the privatization agenda.

The profit motive has been especially egregious in the promotion of online charter schools. As Ravitch shows, two key groups came together in the late 1990s—policymakers who were willing to sacrifice "imagination, joy, and disciplined inquiry" in the classroom to achieve the elusive goal of cost savings, and entrepreneurs who saw business opportunity in declining funding for schools—to create an emerging market for online instruction. Key players included the Gates, Broad, and Walton Family Foundations, which touted something called "the ten elements of high-quality digital learning." ALEC was a big promoter too, along with such companies as Pearson, Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt, Apex Learning, and McGraw Hill, which all stood to benefit. The project was all about winning market share through connivance

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with government, persuading states to require students to take at least one online course and to authorize virtual charter schools. Promoters made dizzying promises of high achievement. Expectations soared. But it turned out that Secretary of Education Bill Bennett had been right in 1999 when he said that there was “no good evidence that most uses of computers significantly improve learning.” Students in online charter schools and classes have performed far below students in conventional classes. That did not prevent Pennsylvania from approving four more cyber-charters in 2012. Nor has it stopped the state of Ohio from paying cyber schools \$6,000 per pupil—the same amount public schools receive. Since the cost of salaries, facilities, and transportation are low-to-nonexistent at cyber-schools, these schools reap huge profits. This is why their promoters lobbied the Ohio legislature so hard. The online-charter-school movement, like the reform movement as a whole, is all about the money.

Still, that is not the full story, as Ravitch knows. When she responds to the inevitable question “What is to be done?” she does not directly address the broader cultural attitudes that got us in this mess: the superstitious reverence for high-tech entrepreneurship, the techno-determinism that assumes we must allow technology to shape our future for us, the market-utilitarian indifference to anything that can’t be valued in dollars. But she challenges them implicitly, through her intelligent, humane policy recommendations.

To redeem the possibilities of democratic public education, she writes, we must address poverty and racial segregation, provide good prenatal care for every pregnant woman, make high-quality early-childhood education available to all children, and provide the medical and social services poor kids need to keep up with their more privileged peers—health clinics, summer programs, etc. We are back in the Great Society, and it is not such a bad place. But Ravitch is also sensitive to what goes on inside the classroom. She wants a full, balanced curriculum at every school—arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, math, physical education. A modest proposal, one might think, except that No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have reduced the curriculum to mere test prep in all but the most affluent school districts. Tests should be used to diagnose trends and difficulties; the best ones, in Ravitch’s view, are the no-stakes tests like the NAEP. Tests are not scientific instruments, she insists, quoting a test grader who says a test is like “a scientific experiment in which everything is a variable.” The only qualification for employment as a standardized test grader is “a willingness to throw independent thinking out the window and follow the absurd and ever-changing guidelines set by the test-scoring companies.” The testing mania arises from the false assumption that high test scores lead to better jobs. The tests’ emphasis on one right answer is antagonistic to true learning, to the development of independent thought.

We need a re-orientation of educational policy, not only away from the fixation on testing but away from the market model in general. We might start by banning for-profit charters and charter chains, recognizing, in Ravitch’s words, that “the primary goal of a for-profit organization is to maximize profit, not to produce great education.” Underlying that recognition is another: that public education is a public responsibility, not a consumer good. In education as in so many other areas of contemporary discourse, what claims to be cutting-edge and market-driven is often a reversion to earlier modes of business thought. “The current obsession with data and data-based decision making is not twenty-first century thinking,” Ravitch writes. In fact, this obsession resembles nothing so much as the mechanistic numerology of early twentieth-century management thinkers like Frederick Winslow Taylor.

Business buzzwords, never precise to begin with, can become a blunt, destructive instrument in hands of education reformers. “Creative disruption,” for example, may or may not be an appropriate entrepreneurial strategy, but it is an altogether inappropriate approach to education, which proceeds (especially in the early years) by slow, deliberate increments. As Ravitch observes: “‘Creative disruption’ is certainly disruptive, but it is not creative. It is not what children and adolescents need. It sacrifices social and human values that are more important to children and to society than consumerism, competition, and choice.” What those values may be is a matter of democratic debate. But we can be sure they include efforts to sustain community, encourage informed citizenship, and nurture zest for inquiry—the commitments Ravitch’s own career embodies. We are in her debt for reminding us that they still matter.

The attempt to create a system of mass public education has always been bedeviled by anti-intellectual conformism, half-baked theories, and a distrust of superior achievement and idiosyncrasy. One can understand why frustrated parents might respond to the reformers’ rhetoric of excellence. Sometimes the reformers even deliver what they promise—for example, when charter schools offer brighter and more fortunate students a refuge from the pull toward mediocrity inherent in batch-processing. But charter schools are no panacea, especially for poorer students; and neither is standardized testing, the other main arrow in the reformers’ quiver. As Ravitch shows, the focus on quantifiable standards and market models exacerbates more problems than it solves. At bottom the reformers’ aim is uncreative destruction: the hollowing out of the commons, where public education once occupied an honored place. However intractable the difficulties of the public schools, we would do well to remember that they are the difficulties of the larger society as well. The privatization project—scapegoating public schools, starving them of resources, and depriving their teachers of professional dignity—is a dangerous business. As Otis Redding said, you don’t miss your water till your well runs dry. ■