



## **Diane Ravitch: No Child Left Behind, Reform Killing Public Education**

By *Kenneth Terrell*, Posted March 25, 2010 [[LINK^](#)]

In the spring of 1991, education scholar Diane Ravitch got a phone call from Education Secretary Lamar Alexander inviting her to lunch in Washington. He asked her to become an assistant secretary, and—excited by this high-profile opportunity—Ravitch accepted and stayed until 1993. Since then, as a writer and blogger, she has become known as an advocate of reform via school choice, charter schools, and accountability. But to the surprise of many, Ravitch now opposes those strategies in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. Ravitch recently spoke with *U.S. News* about her new views. Excerpts:

### **Why have you changed your mind about the No Child Left Behind Act?**

First of all, I was not an architect of No Child Left Behind, as some people seem to think. But along with about 90 percent of the House and the Senate, [I thought] it sounded like a good idea. Who wants to leave any child behind? So, yeah, I supported it with the hopes that it would lead to improvements. And I've concluded, based on the evidence, that it has not.

### **How has No Child Left Behind failed?**

It has encouraged the states to dumb down the standards by saying that every state would have its own definition of proficiency, every state would use its own test, by setting a deadline of 2014—which is totally unrealistic—by which all students are supposed to be proficient, and then having very onerous sanctions for schools that are unable to meet this completely unrealistic deadline. It's meant that everyone is encouraged to find ways to produce the numbers, and one thing we know from the market sector is that when the numbers are what counts, people meet the numbers, even though they sacrifice the goals of the organization. What we're doing instead of producing well-educated people is producing the numbers. The gains since No Child Left Behind was adopted are smaller than before No Child Left Behind was adopted.

### **How exactly did education reform move from the curriculum-focused and content-focused ideas of the late '80s and '90s to standardized testing and accountability?**

In the early '90s, when I was working with the first Bush administration, there was a huge blowup over the history standards, and it turned into a very vitriolic controversy. Consequently, because of all the press and outrage about the history standards, people in political life said, "Back off; don't have anything to do with content. It's dangerous. Keep the standards vague." When the second President Bush was elected, he came to Washington with the Texas plan. That is, if you test the kids every year, hold people accountable, everybody will make progress. It sounded wonderful. [But] by putting in place a regime devoted solely to basic skills, [those skills] would [become] the focus of everyone's attention because the regime was loaded with incentives and sanctions—mostly sanctions. Teachers would find it hard to do anything other than basic skills, and that's not a good education.

### **What needs to happen to make the law more effective for schools?**

Aside from scrapping 2014 because it's become a joke—obviously 100 percent of the kids are not going to become proficient four years from now, but I think that if we changed it to 2024 it would also be ridiculous—I think the main thing to change is . . . to get rid of the remedies and the sanctions because the remedies don't work and the sanctions don't work. What No Child Left Behind has given the United States is an atmosphere of punitiveness. The word *accountability* has come to be a synonym for *punish*. If students don't learn, it's the teachers' fault. Fire the teachers. Close the schools. We're now on a wrecking mission to destroy American public education.

### **What can charter schools contribute, and what are some of the risks involved?**

The charter school movement initially began as a way of helping public schools by creating schools run by public-school teachers where teachers could experiment with different ways of educating the kids who were hardest to educate. It has turned into a major way to privatize public education, to take public-school students and public-school funding and hand it over to entrepreneurs who, in many cases, are paying themselves outsize executive compensation. The reason that I've become skeptical about charters is this: They range in quality. Most of them are no different, in terms of their performance, than regular public schools. Charter schools have never outperformed regular public schools, so this doesn't seem to me to be a very productive way to engage in major education reform. Furthermore, to the extent that we dramatically expand charters, as the president is proposing, we will see more shady operators, more entrepreneurs who are in it to make money, and more scandals. It's inevitable. Wherever there is a lot of government money, it attracts bees, and the bees sometimes don't make honey; they just make money.

### **What should parents do to ensure that their children are getting the best education?**

There are two different questions. One is what should parents do, and the other is what should policymakers do. If policymakers simply say, "It's every family for itself," we're going back to the early 19th century, before we had public education. Some people had private tutors, and some people sent their kids to religious schools, and some people got together and had little schools that they created. Then at a certain point, there was an awareness that the public had a responsibility to educate the children of the community. If we're doing a bad job of that, we really should develop public policy that looks to improving the quality of those schools and not just close them down and hand them over to private entrepreneurs. Because then we're creating a marketplace, and markets have failures. Markets do not succeed in providing equal opportunity. They succeed in creating winners and losers. We saw that in the [economic collapse] of the fall of 2008, and that could happen to our schools as well.

### **In education, is it more important for the leadership to be collaborative or assertive?**

The leadership should collaborate with teachers and should not coerce them. It should not force changes that the teachers think are unwise. If the people who are in the classroom with children every day become alienated and disaffected and say that you're making them do something that they don't think is right, it's not going to work. Forcing people to do something they think is wrong is not a successful tactic. If you're going to be the general, it's a bad idea to turn your heavy weaponry on your own troops.