

A RIGHT DENIED

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR GENUINE SCHOOL REFORM



REBUTTING RAVITCH

BY WHITNEY TILSON

Diane Ravitch is a well-known and widely respected historian, author and commentator in the education arena. Her [bio](#) is extraordinarily impressive: a professor of education at NYU, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, the author of 11 books and editor of 14 more, Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander from 1991-93 – you get the idea

...

For many years, she was one of the leading champions of genuine reform of our nation’s broken public school system, supporting No Child Left Behind, for example, and serving on boards of reform-minded organizations such as Education Next, the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution (Stanford University), and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. However, in recent years she has completely disavowed her earlier beliefs and has become one of the most vocal critics of her former colleagues and the reform agenda.

I believe she is genuine in her new beliefs, cares very much about every child in this country getting a high-quality education, and agrees with me that the current system is failing to deliver this for millions of children, so my differences with her aren’t personal. We simply have mostly quite different views about what is needed to reform the status quo.

Ravitch is very clever in criticizing reformers and their efforts, and argues that because they haven’t produced “the quantum improvement in American education that we all hope for,” this shows that their ideas are flawed. I disagree.

We’ve recently begun a civil email discussion about not only our disagreements, but also areas in which we agree (and there are many). Here’s a link to the first exchange: [An exchange of emails with Diane Ravitch, focused on what we AGREE on](#)

Overview

I’ve always viewed the struggle to change our public educational system as a journey of 1,000 miles – one that will last beyond my lifetime, if we define the end of the journey as high-quality schools for all children. The system is so big, so broken, and so lacking in market mechanisms that might force improvement that this is going to take a long time. That said, I’m not discouraged – I think we’re

making progress – but I’m also realistic that more than a quarter century years after Teach for America was founded, more than 20 years after KIPP started, etc., we’re maybe 100 miles (only 10%) into the journey – and it’s been a brutal, bloody journey to date, with reformers being attacked constantly from all sides every step of the way.

The difficulty of this journey and the depth and ferocity of the opposition has resulted in only modest progress, which provides fodder for Ravitch and other critics. When you’re only 10% of the way forward, it’s easy to misread or distort the data and make it look like there’s been no progress at all. And it’s equally easy to blame the people on the journey for the lack of progress and many setbacks along the way, rather than point the finger where it really belongs: the immense difficulty of the task and the powerful, well-organized resistance. In regularly siding with these reform critics (typically the teachers unions or groups affiliated with them), I think Ravitch is wrong.

Responding to Ravitch’s Books

Ravitch’s most recent book, published in 2014, is: [Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools](#). I agree 100% with her chapter critiquing for-profit online charter schools like K12, but mostly disagree with the rest. For a good response to the book, I recommend this article in the NY Post: [Author shows how ridiculous arguments are against school reform](#).

Ravitch’s previous book, published in 2011, is: [The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education](#).

My one-sentence take on this book is that I couldn’t find a single sentence in it (and I looked) that couldn’t have been written by Randi Weingarten (head of the AFT). I found it to be mostly 296 pages of union talking points. While it captures many of the failures of the existing educational system, rather than proposing bold solutions, it mostly takes shots at reformers’ efforts over the past decade to address this crisis (while generally only presenting one side of the story).

Her primary solutions appear to be to build a strong, robust curriculum and have more “well-educated teachers” but she silent on how to achieve this. In short, she longs for the utopian school system of yesteryear (that probably never existed), but has no coherent roadmap for exactly how to get there. Instead, she mostly derides reformers who are out there in the trenches trying to change an unacceptable status quo.

The book also fails to focus enough on the educational malpractice that’s being committed against millions of poor and minority children every day in our most broken mostly inner-city schools. The fact that most schools, principals and teachers are adequate-to-good-to-great doesn’t excuse the fact that a minority are completely failing – and in so doing, are ruining lives of the children who can least afford it. For example, the words “rubber room” don’t appear in the book (I checked the index). Or the fact that 52% of black and 51% of Latino 4th graders are struggling readers (testing Below Basic on NAEP) – incredible in a book filled with so many facts. Or the fact that 2,000 high schools (of 14,000) account for half of the nation’s dropouts. In a book filled with human stories about the evils of Alan Bersin, Joel Klein, and NCLB, where are the stories about the children who have multiple teachers every year, none willing or able to impart knowledge? In 296 pages, she couldn’t have found one story about the horrors

of some schools like [this one](#)??? Instead, she decries efforts to shut down even the most chronically failing schools, wrapping them in a cloak of nostalgic clichés, ignoring their horrific reality.

We both agree the poverty matters a lot, but I think she is too dismissive of the ability of exceptional teachers and schools to change the life trajectories of most children, even those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. There are now hundreds of high-performing inner-city schools (I have visited more than 100 of them all over the country) that prove what is possible, but she dismisses them by saying that all of them are cheating: not taking their fair share of special ed and ELL students, kicking out students who won't pass the tests, etc. Indeed, there is some of this, but I know with certainty because I've seen it dozens of times with my own eyes that there are now many "black swan" schools: ones that are achieving massively better outcomes with students whose demography would suggest that they're going nowhere in life. Rather than dismissing such schools, we should be studying and learning from them – they're mostly doing similar things – and then spreading best practices widely.

Many children do indeed come to school with "very deep problems", but that simply means they need the best teachers and best schools to overcome the fact that they already have two strikes against them. When they get such teachers and schools – which, sadly, is extremely rare, as we have an immoral and despicable system in this country that systematically gives the neediest children the worst teachers and schools – we know with certainty that these children can achieve at high levels and close – and even reverse – the achievement gap.

1) An open letter I wrote to Ravitch (12/3/2010)

Here's an open letter I drafted to her, responding in particular to what she's saying about charter schools (in particular, her failure to distinguish between high-performing and low-performing charter schools) and highlighting the fact that, to the best of my knowledge (I checked with many of the top CMOs), she's visited only *one* high-performing charter school in the past decade (not that this deters her from criticizing them...). The full letter is posted [here](#) and here's an excerpt:

Dear Diane,

In your latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, you break with your past views and roundly condemn many tenets of the modern education reform movement: school choice, testing, accountability for students and teachers, *No Child Left Behind*, and the reforms undertaken in San Diego and, in particular, New York under Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein. Last summer you continued your assault on the reform movement when, in accepting the National Education Association's Friend of Education Award, you lambasted the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* initiative and implored the teachers' unions to "stand up" against "the current wave of destructive reforms."

As someone who has been fighting in the education reform trenches for over twenty years, I am puzzled by the radical change in your views on education and I struggle to understand what alternatives you propose to improve upon the unacceptable status quo. I am most bewildered, however, by the war you have been waging against charter schools. In recent months, you have become an increasingly vocal critic of charters, assailing "wealthy lawyers and hedge-fund managers" (like me) for supporting them. But, on many levels, I believe your criticisms of charters don't hold water.

...We can agree that some charter schools are no better – and, in certain cases, worse – than neighboring district schools and that these particular schools should be shut down. (In New York, 10 charters have been shut down for poor performance.) But what about the extremely successful “no excuses” charter schools – such as KIPP, Icahn, Harlem Success, and Uncommon Schools? These schools offer precisely what you champion for all schools: high-quality teachers; a culture of strong values, rigor, and high expectations; and a rich, robust curriculum. Yet instead of celebrating them, you grudgingly acknowledge some isolated successes but quickly dismiss them, attributing their success to “creaming” – and then decry “privatization,” essentially calling for an end to all charter schools, regardless of quality.

Much of what you claim about charter schools is so off base that I wondered how familiar you actually are with these schools. So I recently contacted several charter schools – all in New York City, a short distance from you – to ask whether you had ever visited them. They could only recall one visit from you in the past decade.

All of them, however, said that they would be delighted to host you anytime, so here is my public challenge to you Diane: visit a few high-performing charter schools. See for yourself that these schools are doing exactly what you call for in terms of high-quality teachers and a rich curriculum. If you do visit, I think you’ll agree that many charters, especially here in New York, are achieving extraordinary outcomes and should be expanded as rapidly as possible.

2) Nelson Smith: *Ravitch on the Road to Damascus* (3/2/10)

Nelson Smith, former President of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (I was on the board years ago), does a nice job rebutting Ravitch’s many mistakes in characterizing charter schools (which, contrary to Ravitch’s assertion, *nobody* thinks are *the* solution):

The book is actually more evenhanded in reporting charter academic performance than Ravitch’s ominous Tweets had suggested. Of course she covers the negative CREDO study, but also reports Hoxby’s New York work and positive studies in several other cities. Too bad that these more positive reports, and success stories like KIPP, had to be explained away by motivation, creaming, supposed financial advantages, or other rationales – instead of being investigated as a source of promise.

Ravitch is a sincere small-d democrat, and much of this book’s argument comes back to her own notion of democracy. She objects to philanthropic support of charters and other innovation because foundations aren’t elected. She opposes charters and other forms of choice because they undercut the viability of neighborhood schools, “the one local institution where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up and debate and engage in democratic give-and-take with their neighbors.”

But she’s viewing those neighborhood schools in a rose-tinted rear-view mirror. Some are still quite wonderful, but too many simply fail to educate some or all of their students – the fact Al Shanker decried 22 years ago in first proposing charters. Ravitch never really comes to terms with this issue, other than calling for stronger curricula and such nostrums as “coordinated social services.” She rues that as charters multiplied, “few voices were raised on behalf of the democratic vision of public education.”

An inner-city parent might well ask why keeping her child in a dysfunctional “regular” school should fulfill anyone’s notion of democracy.

What’s really odd is that the things Ravitch wants for our schools (especially inner-city ones), such as a rich curriculum, are mostly being achieved by the high-performing charter schools that she trashes with her blanket condemnation of all charter schools.

3) Nelson Smith with another rebuttal: [*Is Education on the Wrong Track?*](#) (3/21/10)

Your main contention is that charters “have never done better than regular public schools” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). As someone who used to head the research and improvement office at the U.S. Department of Education, you must know that NAEP is the wrong barometer for this kind of evaluation. And, as someone who rails against evaluating teachers on the basis of a single test, it’s ironic that you return repeatedly to this one measure.

NAEP is a snapshot. It doesn’t follow students over time...

National NAEP results are also swayed by the larger samples of charter schools in big states. As Andrew Rotherham notes, chartering is powerfully influenced by state policy and regulation – and some of those big states in the NAEP sample have terrible laws and negligent authorizers, which can skew national outcomes.

Looking at NAEP’s state-level results, however, you can hardly maintain that charters have “never done better.” In 2007 (the most recent year for reading results), in states where sufficient numbers of charter schools were surveyed, charters outperformed other public schools in eight of 13 states at the fourth-grade level, and in ten of twelve states at the eight-grade level. In the 2009 math results, charters outperformed other public schools in ten of 18 states in the eighth grade, and eight of 18 states in the fourth grade. Remember, also, that charters are usually clustered in cities – and for urban schools to compete even this well against statewide results is an accomplishment.

Your book cites the 2009 CREDO report and its adverse national findings about charters, but, given its limitations (including a charter sample dominated by first-year test-takers), a sharper lens is needed. In 2008, researchers Julian Betts and Emily Tang at the University of California at San Diego analyzed a set of charter studies using only the most sophisticated methodologies. They wrote: “Despite considerable variation among charter schools, the overall evidence suggests that charter schools more often outperform than underperform their traditional public school counterparts.” We would love to see serious new funding that could broaden such local and statewide apples-to-apples studies to the national level.

In your passion to rethink, you’ve apparently decided that the book on charters is already closed – although after 18 years, we’re just in the opening chapters. Let’s remember that the real question is not whether an average of charters works, or whether a group of charters happens to work, but whether the charter model itself can work—allowing variation at the outset, ensuring high accountability for outcomes, and cycling upward with the strongest performers in the lead. As with any innovation, there have been hits and misses. We’ve learned what kind of laws help produce strong charters, and seen the consequences when oversight is lax. Now we’re putting these lessons to work, fueled by new federal funding for expansion and replication of the most effective charter

models, and by our own determination to replace the weak performers. (In fact, according to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, large authorizers who oversee most charters are already refusing renewal to about 15 percent of charters annually, and revoking a smaller number in mid-course.)

4) Chester Finn: [*School's Out*](#) (3/3/10)

Here's a spot-on critique of Ravitch's book by Chester Finn, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which is all the more powerful due to his long-time, ongoing close relationship with her. He *nails* what's wrong with her arguments (emphasis added in the last sentence):

A lot of innovations and reforms, meant to solve the underlying achievement problem, have failed to do so – hence our essentially-flat test scores and graduation rates these past three decades – and some have had malign side effects. That's what Diane reports and in many areas I agree.

Yet when it comes to the future, we mostly disagree about what course America should follow. She has become more conservative while I have become more radical.

She would undo most if not all of the “structural” reforms that have been put in place in recent years – mayoral control, performance-based pay, charter laws and other choice schemes, reliance on entrepreneurship and market incentives, federal efforts to incentivize and prod the system to change in constructive directions, testing and results-based accountability, and more. She would, instead, look to the “great American school system” and a (somehow) renewed culture and family structure to do right by our children. Yes, she would augment that system with better-educated (and compensated) teachers, a strong core curriculum, a different (curriculum-based) approach to assessment, greater emphasis on behavior and attitudes, and a number of collateral “social” changes such as better families and home environments. At the end of the day, however, she has concluded that, after all the policy fumbblings of the past couple of decades, the public-school system and its custodians and employees are best suited to make education decisions that will benefit the nation and its next generation.

I agree about the curriculum part but not much else. The failures of recent years have left me angrier than ever with that system, its adults-first priorities, its obduracy, inertia, and greed, as well as its capacity to throw sand into the gears of every effort to set it right. Unlike Diane, I don't trust teacher unions to do right by children (or to do right by great teachers, for that matter); I don't expect locally-elected school boards to put kids' interests first; I see “neighborhood schools” as education death-traps for America's neediest youngsters; and I think the “Broader, Bolder” social-reform agenda is on the one hand naïve (most of these things just aren't going to happen on their own and can't be made to happen) and, on the other hand, deeply mischievous (because it lifts responsibility from schools for all that they could and sometimes do accomplish pretty much single-handedly).

Where I come out – you can read more in *National Affairs'* [“The End of the Education Debate”](#) – is that America needs not less education reform but far more fundamental and radical reform. I want *every* child to have quality school choices, I want stronger (and broader) external standards, I want more open paths to becoming an educator, I want empowered school leaders (*really* empowered, in ways that would also break the union stranglehold) who are compensated like CEOs, I want super

pay for great instructors and no pay for incompetents, and I want a complete makeover of “local control.” The system needs a shakeup from top to bottom, not a restoration.

Diane thinks my prescription is guided by wishful thinking and unproven theories and would destroy an honorable and needed institution. I think that, while her analyses of past failures are often spot-on and frequently aligned with my own, her prescription for the future is guided by wishful thinking, nostalgia, and unwarranted faith in an antiquated institutional arrangement that was already demonstrating its failure when we founded the Educational Excellence Network and has done nothing since to renew itself.

5) Tom Carroll, [*What Would Diane Do?*](#) (3/9/10)

Tom Carroll, President of the Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability, points out numerous flaws in Ravitch’s book, the two most important of which are:

A) Her biases that lead her to be “a polemicist not an objective academic”:

Ravitch’s laser-like demand for research-based evidence is deployed unevenly. For issues she opposes – mayoral control and charter schools, for example – she demands irrefutable proof of their effectiveness and clearly delights when she finds a negative nugget in a critical study. But, for things she supports – teacher unions, small classes, and more public input – she offers and seeks no evidence that they have a positive impact on educational outcomes however measured.

Ravitch’s selectivity was shown when she responded to three charter studies in a row in the past year. When Margaret (Macke) Raymond of Stanford issued a study showing many charter schools were not performing so well, Ravitch uncritically highlighted the findings. When Caroline Hoxby found stronger charter results specifically in New York City, Ravitch scoured the report to find methodological issues to jump on. And, then, when Raymond did a study that showed NYC’s charters performed much better than her national sample, Ravitch picked apart the results, an impulse she didn’t have when Raymond’s earlier national study lined up with her anti-charter position. These are the actions of a polemicist not an objective academic.

B) Her failure to propose solutions:

Ravitch’s book is light on these details – more a list of don’ts than a list of dos.

While reading her chapter on “lessons learned,” I couldn’t help but wonder what specifically Ravitch would do if she was appointed New York City Schools Chancellor.

A few questions for starters: Would she keep the UFT contract in New York City? If not, what would she change? Does she think the length of school day and year should be changed? To what? What if the UFT objected? She opposes merit pay, but does she really think good teachers and mediocre teachers should be paid the same just because they have been around the same amount of time and have accumulated the same number of teacher credits? Would she expand the number of charter schools or impose a moratorium? Would she eliminate the cap on any high-performing charter schools? Since she praises Catholic schools, would she favor an education tax credit proposal that actually would allow them to be viable economically? Does she think Congressional Democrats did a

favor for poor parents when they killed off the D.C. scholarship program? Regarding the state's testing program that she critiques, would she "end it or mend it"? How?

6) Peter Murphy: *Diane Ravitch "Changed Her Mind" to What? Not Much (3/9/10)*

Another spot-on critique by Peter Murphy, Director of Policy & Communications at the New York Charter Schools Association:

Dr. Ravitch, for all her knowledge and experience, comes off with her latest treatise as oh-so-conventional by falling back on the same shibboleths and excuse-making typical of so many urban school districts. She even dusts off that golden oldie: blaming "poverty" for low student academic performance, rather than the adults in charge of the school systems doing such a disservice to so many young people in need. Weak-kneed public officials and stultifying teacher union contracts she finds no fault, even as *Time* magazine's Joe Klein ([here](#)) and *Newsweek*'s Evan Thomas ([here](#)) challenge this ongoing education malpractice.

For a more detailed critique of Dr. Ravitch's book, see Tom Carroll's review in the *Huffington Post* ([here](#)).

Not only is Dr. Ravitch the latest and consummate champion of conventional thinking in public education, but she's a vapid one at that. She opposes charter schools, and federally-inspired testing and accountability, yet is bereft of anything thoughtful or useful in their place. Instead, Ravitch presents bland truisms like supporting "coherent curriculum" and that the "government should commit a good school in every neighborhood in the nation." (Wow.) Incidentally, isn't that precisely what Chancellor Joel Klein – with whom Ravitch sharply disagrees – has been trying to do by approving new charter schools all across New York City?

In some ways it's pathetic to observe Dr. Ravitch revert to something so opposite of what she herself was for many years: innovative and willing to try new things. Perhaps that field got too crowded in the last two decades; now, she's the latest critic, making a new splash. Her criticisms should come with more than prosaic drivel.

7) Kevin Carey: *Is Education on the Wrong Track?* A TNR symposium, March 16, 2010

Kevin Carey, policy director of Education Sector, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, D.C., with a brilliant, scathing rebuttal of Ravitch's book (emphasis added):

But the lessons the book draws from these stories are very strange. You've come to see the totality of American education policy from the late 1980s to the present day as a gigantic failure – despite the fact that you supported and promoted those policies of accountability, testing, and school choice for nearly all of that time. You "jumped aboard a bandwagon," but now you have "lost the faith."

The problem with "I was wrong about everything" as the prelude to an argument is that it doesn't exactly inspire confidence in the repudiator's judgment. And, in this case, **the book simply trades one pre-defined agenda for another: the collected talking points of the reactionary education establishment. It is a philosophy of resentment and futility, grounded in the**

conviction that public schools – and the adults within them – can’t really be expected to do better than they currently are.

So, if an outsider comes in and improves results and test scores, as Bersin did in San Diego, then results and test scores “may not be the right question” to ask. If different tests show different levels of improvement in New York City under Michael Bloomberg, we should believe whichever results are worse. Multiple econometric studies from respected academics finding that low-income children would benefit hugely from being assigned to the best teachers are lampooned as an “urban myth,” because “this is akin to saying that baseball teams should consist only of players who hit over .300 and pitchers who win at least 20 games every season ... no such team exists.”

Diane, you live in Brooklyn – haven’t you heard of the 2009 World Series Champion New York Yankees, whose nine starters averaged 25 home runs apiece during the regular season? If the teachers in the Bronx were as good as the baseball players, students there would learn much more.

Meanwhile, you say the intensive instructional model used by “high-performing charter chains such as KIPP and Achievement First” is “inherently unsustainable because it discourages teacher professionalism and relies on a steady infusion of newcomers.” If the schools are high-performing without teacher professionalism, what does that say about professionalism as you define it? And what’s unsustainable about relying on a steady infusion of newcomers? If one thing is certain, it’s that our colleges will graduate a fresh batch of them every year.

In addition to discounting the possibility of rapid improvement, you also seem oddly blind to the educational dysfunction that ruins so many young lives. You repeatedly slam Washington, D.C.’s reformist superintendent, Michelle Rhee, for shutting down some of the city’s most notorious low-performing schools. Most neighborhood schools, you say, are “laden with traditions and memories ... their graduates return and ... want to see the trophy cases and the old photographs, to hear the echoes in the gymnasium and walk on the playing fields. To close these schools down serves no purpose other than to destroy those memories.” **This bizarre hypothetical nostalgia is utterly disconnected from the educational dead zones that blight many impoverished neighborhoods, places that students struggle to forget, if they can.**

If not school reform, then what? You give a hint in the book’s first chapter, where you describe reviewing your collected writings: “I began to see two themes at the center of what I have been writing about for more than four decades. Once constant has been my skepticism about pedagogical fads, enthusiasms, and movements. The other has been a deep belief in the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum.” The problem is that your distaste for faddism and naiveté can be overwhelming – you see these sins in everyone you happen to disagree with about anything.

For example (there are many), the book concludes: **“Reformers imagine that is easy to create a successful school. It is not.” This is complete nonsense. Nobody thinks it’s easy to create a successful school, particularly when at-risk children are involved.** I have heard dozens of reformers go on about this subject over the years. They’re *obsessed* with the difficulty of building good schools, to the point, frankly, of being pretty hard to shut up about it.

Throughout the book, you accuse those you newly disagree with of believing in, variously, silver bullets, magic feathers, panaceas, quick fixes, and miracle cures. **Can we please retire the**

insulting declaration that “there are no silver bullets”? You may have believed in them once, but that doesn’t mean everyone else made the same mistake.

“What, then, can we do to improve schools and education?” the book asks, finally, **with twelve pages to go**. The first eight of those pages mount an impassioned and persuasive argument for a rich national curriculum. And in this, you are absolutely right. But curricula are only one part of the equation. We also need great teachers to deliver them, assessments to know if student are learning, schools that have overwhelming incentives to support them, and options for parents in an increasingly diverse world. In other words: a rich curriculum *and* testing, accountability, and choice. As Ben rightly [notes](#), this is exactly the formula Massachusetts used (along with strong unions and fair school funding) to achieve some of the best student learning results in the world.

... **In the end, *Death and Life* is painfully short on non-curricular ideas that might actually improve education for those who need it most. The last few pages contain nothing but generalities:** “We must encourage schools to use measures of educational accomplishment that are appropriate to the subjects studied.” “When schools are struggling, the authorities should do whatever is necessary to improve them.” “Teachers must be well educated and know their subjects.” That’s all on page 238. The complete lack of engagement with *how* to do these things is striking.

Diane, your collected writings on the history of American education are invaluable. I have a copy of *Left Back* on my bookshelf and refer to it often. But, **while *Death and Life* succeeds as history, it fails entirely as analysis. Having fought a good fight, you seem to have left the field in weariness and frustration. Let’s hope that others don’t follow.**

8) Andy Rotherham: *Is Education on the Wrong Track?*

Subject: *Death and Life* is being debated as a policy prescription. That’s a problem, because it doesn’t offer an agenda. A TNR Symposium, March 17, 2010

Unfortunately, while it’s heavy on scrutiny, *Death and Life* doesn’t add up to a whole in terms of where you want us to go based on your analysis. In other words, outside of a call for better curriculum, this book falls short as a policy agenda. And make no mistake: Despite your protestations that you don’t want to view things through the prism of policy, given the state of play in the education debate today, your work is being taken as a policy prescription.

More specifically, it’s being taken as the antidote to the Duncan-Obama direction on education policy and the ideas taking hold in an increasing number of states and localities. Yet, while it’s a powerful *cri de coeur*, it is neither granular nor forward-looking enough to serve as a blueprint for policymakers.

For instance, you are selective about the evidence on charter schools, ignoring the contributions from the many high-performing charters across various geographies.

... Likewise on testing and accountability. You paint a broad portrait of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as “test and punish” but ignore the complexity of the policy and its implementation. States, for example, have made an astonishing number of poor implementation decisions that have done more to turn the law into a caricature than anything in the statute has. Meanwhile, after two decades, the

experience of states and school districts with standards, testing, and accountability is highly varied. As with charter schools, these policies are not monolithic, and there are clear inferences policymakers can draw, particularly about the experience of poor and minority youngsters. And the same is true, of course, of philanthropy or school leadership. In both cases, the experiences, outcomes, ongoing learning, and changes are highly varied and complex.

I could go on, but the point is obvious: The book offers plenty of legitimate critiques in all these reform areas, and others. Yet painting with a broad brush does much to arouse the passions of advocates, and little to shed light on the issues. It merely fans the flames of today's mostly unproductive debates.

... Similarly, given what we know about the tortured politics of our education system absent a robust accountability regime, how do you expect to see change enacted? Regulatory capture – meaning that the ostensibly regulated actually control the regulators – is more rampant in American elementary and secondary education than in any other policy domain.

You couldn't be more right that there are no panaceas. Unfortunately, though, *Death and Life* offers too many panaceas of its own. So, while your change of heart on some key issues and your criticism of many of today's reforms and reformers is a soothing balm for those resisting radical changes to our low-functioning system of education, it is not a way forward from where we are today.

9) Jay Greene's Blog: [*Ravitch is Wrong Week*](#) April 5th, 2010

On Jay Greene's blog, Stuart Buck — graduate of Harvard Law School, author of "Acting White" (Yale Univ. Press, 2010, <http://www.amazon.com/Acting-White-Ironic-Legacy-Desegregation/dp/0300123914>) and current doctoral fellow in Jay Greene's department — wrote a five-part critique of Ravitch's book:

As an overall matter, the book says little, if anything, that is actually new on the subjects of testing and choice. What Ravitch is really selling with this book is the story of her personal and ideological conversion. Not so long ago, she was writing articles like "[In Defense of Testing](#)," or "[The Right Thing: Why Liberals Should Be Pro-Choice](#)," a lengthy article in *The New Republic* that remains one of the most passionate and eloquent defenses of school choice and vouchers in particular. Now she seems to be a diehard opponent of these things. But she's not saying anything that other diehard opponents haven't already said countless times.

The book does score a few points in critiquing the charter school movement (e.g., charter schools have an unfair advantage in competing with Catholic schools in the inner cities, and charter test results haven't been as promising as might have been expected), or in critiquing testing and accountability (e.g., states have been watering down their standards, as shown by wide discrepancies between NAEP and state tests).

But these few good points are outweighed by the bad arguments and leaps of illogic that permeate much of the book. The book's faults fall into five general categories, each of which will be the subject of a blog post this week:

1) Ignoring or selectively citing scholarly literature;
<http://jaygreene.com/2010/04/05/ravitch-is-wrong-week-day-1/>

2) Misinterpreting the scholarly literature that she does cite;

<http://jaypgreene.com/2010/04/06/ravitch-is-wrong-week-day-2/>

3) Caricaturing her opponents in terms of strawman arguments, rather than taking the best arguments head-on;

<http://jaypgreene.com/2010/04/07/ravitch-is-wrong-week-day-3/>

4) Tendering logical fallacies; and

<http://jaypgreene.com/2010/04/08/ravitch-is-wrong-week-day-4/>

5) Engaging in a double standard, such as holding a disfavored position to a high burden of proof while blithely accepting more problematic evidence that supports one's own position (or not looking for evidence at all).

<http://jaypgreene.com/2010/04/09/ravitch-is-wrong-week-day-5/>

10) James Merriman: *One on One with Diane Ravitch* (5/5/10)

The NYC Charter School Center's James Merriman debated Diane Ravitch about charter schools. Here's his blog comment with a link to the video:

Yesterday, I debated Diane Ravitch on [New York 1's](#) Inside City Hall.

[Watch it](#) for yourself, but I have to say there is a Moby Dick quality to her obsession with charter schools.

While Professor Ravitch has every right to try to engage in a public renunciation of her former views — including her support for choice and accountability — it isn't right for her to atone for her self-perceived sins on the backs of desperate parents and committed public charter school teachers and principals.

I'm disheartened that a scholar of her stature continues to perpetuate several myths — including the ridiculous notion that charter schools, which as we all know are PUBLIC schools, have conceived some villainous plot to privatize public education. She also continues to cherry pick data to support her conclusions when there is now solid [evidence](#) from multiple, independent [studies](#) that in New York City charter schools are indeed getting better results for children.

For my latest blog posts on Ravitch, please see the following links:

1) My email of May 25th, 2010

Here's an interview Ravitch did with the Dallas Morning News, in which she talks down both KIPP and Harlem Success:

Let's go back to charter schools. Dallas has one KIPP Academy. Houston has more. Do you think they are good charters?

It depends. Michael Feinberg (a KIPP founder) invited me to Houston in October and I'm going down. They do a good job, but they had a high attrition rate in a Bay Area sample. They took 100 kids at random and 60 percent dropped out within three years. For those who remained, they can say they are succeeding. For those 40, it is good. But they don't tell you the success is with the survivors.

I liked the original idea of charters: A group of teachers could form a small school and use it as a research lab for public education. They would take unmotivated kids and take what they learned back to the school and say this is how we solved this problem. These are now the minority among charters. Most now want to compete with schools, not make them better. They want to drive them out of business.

What's an example?

The Harlem Success Academy. It's a chain of four schools. The head gets \$400,000 for running four campuses with a total of 1,000 kids.

How do they compete with public schools?

They compete for the kids who get high scores on the state test. They get fancy solicitation letters to come there. They are now moving to the South Bronx, where they will skim off the highest-performing schools.

Before I respond to her specific allegations, I was curious whether she's ever visited the schools she so likes to criticize and see what they're doing with her own eyes, so I checked: she last visited a KIPP more than a DECADE ago, and she's NEVER visited any Harlem Success school. So it's hard to believe her views on these schools are informed and balanced if she's never visited one???

As to her specific allegations about KIPP's attrition rates, this is a story that's more than three years old, which [I covered at the time](#). In short, a few of the KIPP schools in the Bay Area had high student attrition and critics were claiming that this explained KIPP's rising student achievement: namely, that KIPP forced out low-performing kids, which of course would have the effect of raising the average test scores as each class of students progressed from grade to grade.

This is an important issue, so KIPP hired an independent firm, SRI, to investigate this and published the report along with a letter from KIPP's CEO, Richard Barth, on the main page of its web site at www.kipp.org. The report is still available at: http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/SRI_ReportBayAreaKIPPSchools_Final.pdf

The findings can be summarized as follows: at some new KIPP schools, attrition is high. KIPP isn't for everyone. But at nearly every school, attrition falls and at our mature schools, attrition is generally LOWER than comparable nearby schools. Here's a summary from an article by EdWeek's Eric Robelen (full article below):

... several experts cautioned against drawing strong conclusions based on the attrition data. Student mobility, they pointed out, is high in general among low-income and minority urban families, KIPP's prime target.

Also, they said, many of the schools are still quite new, and enrollment is likely to be unsteady early on, especially for schools of choice with the high demands KIPP has for students and families.

“I would expect to see more of that kind of attrition when schools are new,” said Frederick M. Hess, the director of education policy studies at the [American Enterprise Institute](#), a Washington think tank that supports charter schools. “I don’t see anything there that makes me doubt the value of what KIPP’s providing.”

Steve Mancini, a spokesman for KIPP, said the organization is committed to keeping attrition as low as possible. “It’s something we’re taking very seriously, trying to understand and get better at,” he said.

Rates Drop Over Time?

Data the KIPP Foundation provided *Education Week* from a sampling of five schools show some preliminary evidence that attrition rates drop over time.

A campus in Newark, N.J., for example, has seen a steady decline in annual attrition, from about 26 percent during its first year to 8 percent four years later. At KIPP Bridge College Preparatory in Oakland, which showed a high level of attrition for its fall 2003 cohort of students, early data indicate the annual exodus is going down.

“As schools become more established, there’s some evidence that the schools are doing things that are leading to more students’ staying with KIPP on an annual basis,” Mr. Mancini said. “That data is very promising.”

Attrition rates seem to vary widely across the network, according to the data KIPP provided and an *Education Week* analysis of enrollment at 23 KIPP schools nationwide.

For instance, a KIPP pre-K-elementary school in Houston, housed on the same campus as one of the first KIPP middle schools, has seen annual attrition of less than 4 percent in its first three years, the network’s data show. KIPP Ways Academy, in Atlanta, saw annual attrition fluctuate over its first three years, from 21 percent up to 30 percent, then back down to 21 percent.

Data from the Fulton County, Ga., district show that South Fulton Academy, in East Point, had 75 5th graders in 2003-04 and roughly half that number of 8th graders — 39 — this academic year. Those figures do not account for students who repeated a grade or students who entered the school later, though KIPP schools typically add few students in the upper grades.

In sharp contrast, two Houston middle schools — KIPP Academy Middle School and KIPP 3D Academy — had 8th grade enrollments last school year that were 95 percent or more of the 5th grade class three years earlier, state data show.

‘Serve Every Student’

KIPP principals say they are communicating more across the network about strategies to keep more students, and to learn from those who succeed.

“We’re going to do everything we can to serve every student who comes through our doors,” said Molly H. Wood, the principal at Bayview Academy in San Francisco. “We are getting better at explaining why we do what we do, and why the high standards are worth it.”

As for Ravitch’s charges against Harlem Success (“They compete for the kids who get high scores on the state test. They get fancy solicitation letters to come there. They are now moving to the South Bronx, where they will skim off the highest-performing schools.”), she couldn’t be more wrong. Harlem Success, more than any other charter school I’ve seen, tries to get EVERY parent who lives near their schools to apply to their lottery so they can serve ALL students – this is something Ravitch should be celebrating. If Harlem Success is seeking only the “kids who get high scores on the state test”, then why would it spend hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to reach EVERY family, and why would it have applied to NY state for special permission (which was granted) to give PREFERENCE to English Language Learners in next year’s lottery (see <http://edreform.blogspot.com/2010/04/reverse-creaming.html>). And where is Ravitch’s evidence that Harlem Success is skimming? The attached data shows that Harlem Success is serving equally if not more disadvantaged children than nearby district schools.

2) Email of May 22nd, 2010

a) I couldn’t be more pleased that the unions and Ravitch are shooting at us – it’s a wonderful sign that we’ve arrived – but they need to get their facts straight. Ravitch’s letter to Deborah Meier contains one of the greatest all-time howlers: that the debate over education reform is an unfair fight between “an all-star list of billionaires” and poor, impoverished teachers. She writes:

“But something about this scenario is troubling. I guess it is the fundamental unfairness of a fight in which one side has an all-star list of billionaires (and mere multi-millionaires), and the other side has parents and teachers whose resources are meager. Granted, the teachers’ unions have some independent resources, but what they have to spend politically to defend public education is peanuts compared with what the billionaires spend to privatize public schools.”

My friend Michael Tobman, who lobbies for ed reform in NY, did a nice job rebutting this nonsense:

Ravitch’s comments above provoked an outburst of strong language that startled my staff and associates ...

As a regular in Albany and City Hall, the suggestion that our team is competing against interests with limited resources or diminishing influence is simply preposterous and factually inaccurate. It is also disingenuous to assume that the interests of parents and teachers are uniformly aligned.

Our practical reform agenda is opposed by interests so entrenched, they actually believe that a hearing of any positions other than their own reflects a marginal perspective being advanced by sinister forces. The truth lies closer in saying that the very air legislators have been breathing – for decades – has been filtered through UFT and NYSUT offices. We pull back the drapes and open the windows.

OK, my morning rant is done.

b) Charles Sahm does a nice job of rebutting Ravitch as well:

Ravitch opposes lifting the cap on the number of charters statewide – that is, she’s fighting their expansion even while she’s arguing that they enroll too few students.

And that 3 percent figure masks the real impact of these schools. Charters were created to offer better options in communities where traditional public schools are failing. In Harlem, for example, parents for decades had to send their children to public schools that ranked among the city’s lowest-performing. Today, 20 percent of children in Harlem attend charters, including some of the city’s best-performing schools.

Ravitch next testified that charters are ineffective – and again cherry-picked her data. She gleefully cited a 2009 study of charters in 16 states by Stanford researcher Margaret Raymond, which found mixed results on charters nationally. But it excluded New York – and Ravitch glossed over the fact that Raymond applied the same methodology to New York City and found that charters here perform “significantly better.”

As Raymond wrote in *The Post* the day *before* the Perkins hearing, “Nearly a third of New York City charter schools outperform their local peer schools in reading and more than half do so in math.” She noted that very few charters perform worse than nearby public schools and that “the rest of the nation can learn from New York.” (Raymond was invited to present her research at the hearing but wasn’t called upon to testify once it became clear that she’d offer a pro-charter message.)

Ravitch also testified that the federal NAEP tests showed “no significant difference” between charter and non-charter students. Again, other analysts have found otherwise – and, anyway, the fact that charters hold their own against statewide and national averages should be regarded as a success, not a failure: After all, charters largely serve poor, minority children in urban areas – a far more challenging mix of students.

Nor did she reference any of the research that found positive outcomes for charters, including economist Caroline Hoxby’s much noted 2009 analysis of New York’s charter schools. In that study, Hoxby estimated that students who attend a New York City charter school from kindergarten through eighth grade would close 86 percent of the “Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap” in math and 66 percent of the gap in reading.