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Review of Diane Ravitch's Book, "The Life and Death of American Public Schools,"

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Diane Ravitch's The Life and Death of American Public Schools:" A Stimulating Read Regarding Perspective on Educational Policy and Reform

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"And who are you and why are you here?" asked a student my first day of my practicum at a public middle school in lower Manhattan. "I am here from NYU to help you with your reading," I responded with a friendly smile. Looking back at this exchange, I realized that not only did I work hard to help and gain acceptance from the students, I was working just as hard to learn more about public school structures, specifically since I was in NY, the bureaucratic structure that is the NYC Board of Education. While I was working in the schools, I began to open my eyes wider and dig deeper to see what really was occurring in the schools. Diane Ravitch, a historian of education and also an NYU professor does the same in her book, "The Life and Death of American Public Schools." I was lucky enough to hear her speak at the 2011 National Council for the Social Studies Conference in Washington D.C. Her speech discussed various educational reforms and displayed statistics reporting how schools are doing before and after the reforms. Ravitch concluded that the same reforms that were intended to make public education better are in fact making it worse.

Ravitch was Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush and after that, Bill Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which supervises national testing. Her book, *The Life and Death of American Public* Schools, which I read soon after I heard her speech, outlines her intellectual crisis and subsequent transformation of beliefs about American education. She at first is optimistic, even excited about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, and choice. As her career continued on she became a profound skeptic about these same ideas.

In each chapter, Ravitch leaves no rock unturned as she evaluates the effects of these ideas on education over the past two decades. She critiques No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and demonstrates that accountability based on test scores is a negative deterrent to learning. NCLB leaves less time for elective subjects that are not tested, and sadly leaves states to secretively dumb down tests in order to show better results and improvement.

Later in the text, Ravitch discusses the program, Teach for America. Teach for America is a program that recruits young, idealistic, and energetic college graduates to teach in America's poorest neighborhoods. Teach for America candidates do not need a degree in education or even a teaching certificate or license to teach. Immediately one wonders why would people who have not invested four to five years of their life to taking education classes be allowed to teach? These candidates work in the most high-needs school districts, with the most at-risk populations of students who ultimately need the most talented teachers. Many Teach for America teachers end up leaving teaching after two or three years, and are generally not career teachers, a fact which Ravitch views as problematic.

Along with idealistic teacher recruitment programs, Ravitch also critiques charter schools as being unfair competitors to public schools. Charter schools can pick and choose their students, while public schools cannot. Charter schools also have longer school days and often fire their staff as they deem appropriate. Evidence shows that charter schools accept fewer English language learners, students with special education needs, and students with disciplinary problems. Ravitch identifies charter schools as one of the key problems with American public education.

Ravitch moves on to attack rich philanthropists such as "The Billionaire Boys' Club", which gives money to educational causes. She discusses how the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Foundation, and the Broad Foundation, give money to schools, but with serious strings attached. For example, while I was working in NYC, I noticed that some large high school buildings or junior high school buildings would be broken up in to three or four smaller schools. The outside of the building would say the old school's name, but when you entered the school one would find out that it quickly became a maze of many different schools. When I inquired why this was, people told me it is because the schools received money from the Gates Foundation and were required to follow the requirements that came with the money—create small high schools. As I worked at these high schools in 2008, I noticed that none of them featured the elements that I liked best about my high school experience. Barely any of them had a sports team, gymnasium for physical education, a variety of extracurricular programs, or any other features associated with a traditional high school. Ravitch cited a high school in the state of Washington that was torn apart when three small schools were carved out of the one high school. For example, the staff between the schools fought over resources, and parents would move their child from one school to the next if they did not get along with a teacher. Finding time to schedule in the library or gymnasium was a constant stress between staff of the different schools. Ravitch cites these problems and relentlessly attacks the philanthropic foundations for using their money to further their own often ill-fated goals.

Overall Ravitch's book, *The Life and Death of American Public Schools,* was intellectually stimulating to read, especially after hearing her speak. Challenging her arguments, the speaker that followed her at the National Council for the Social Studies Conference was the CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone—Geoffrey Canada. I was so intrigued by her speech I went to immediately buy her book and get her autograph. Needless to say I did not stay to listen to Canada's charter school approach to education. Ravitch's theories are evidenced-based and solid. I especially liked the book. Because of my experiences in the NYC public schools, I can say I have lived many of the topics she discussed. I would recommend anyone interested in educational policy and reform to take the time to read this engaging book.