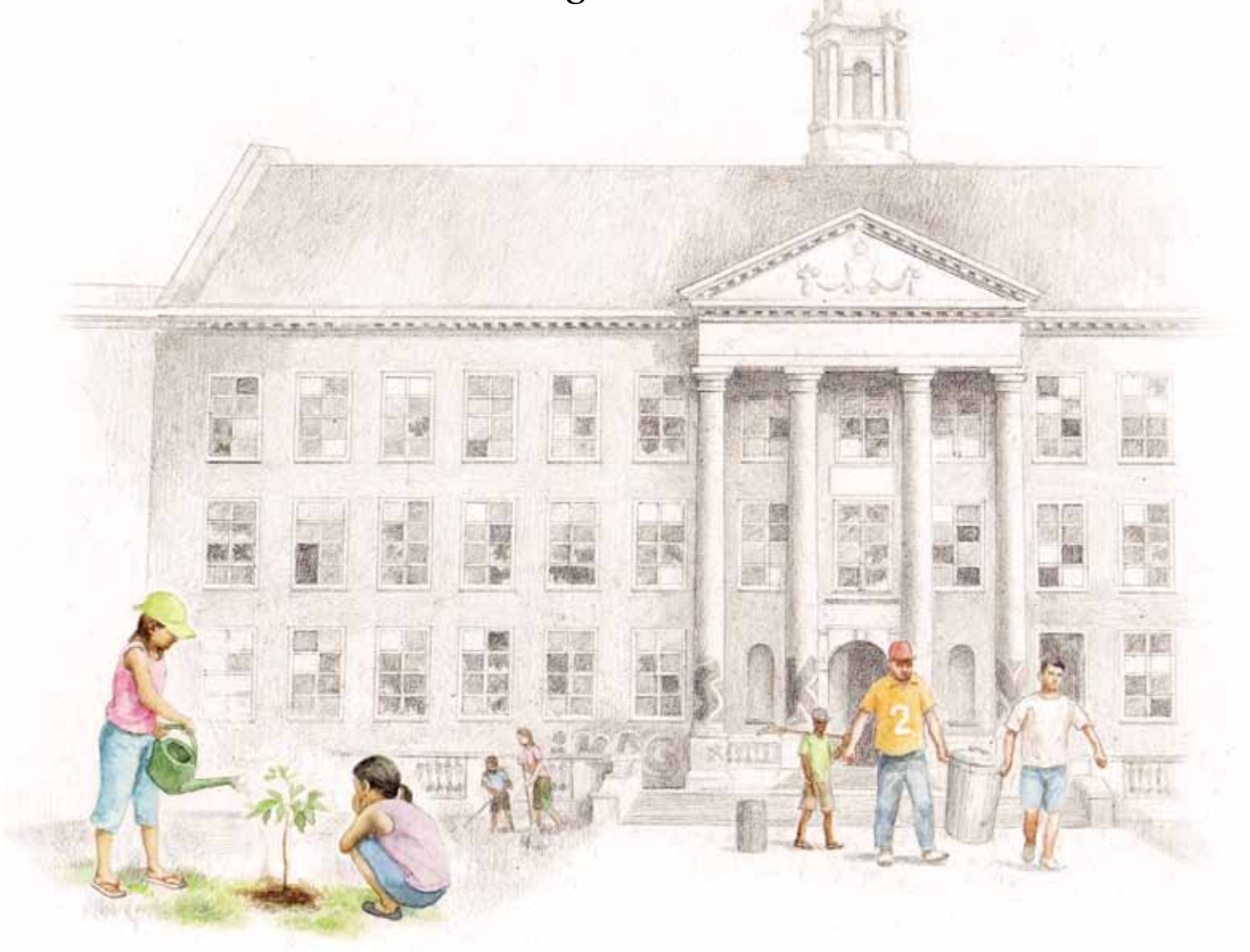
In Need of a Renaissance

Real Reform Will Renew, Not Abandon, Our Neighborhood Schools



By Diane Ravitch

In the fall of 2007, I reluctantly decided to have my office repainted. It was inconvenient. I work at home, on the top floor of a 19th-century brownstone in Brooklyn. Not only did I have to stop working for three weeks, but I had the additional burden of packing up and removing everything in my office. I had to relocate 50 boxes of books and files to other rooms in the house until the painting job was complete.

After the patching, plastering, and painting was done, I began unpacking 20 years of papers and books, discarding those I no longer wanted, and placing articles into scrapbooks. I found that the chore of reorganizing the artifacts of my professional life was pleasantly ruminative. It had a tonic effect, because it allowed me to reflect on the changes in my views over the years.

At the very time that I was packing up my books and belongings, I was going through an intellectual crisis. I was aware that I had undergone a wrenching transformation in my perspective on school reform. Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice, and

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markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas. I was trying to sort through the evidence about what was working and what was not. I was trying to understand why I was increasingly skeptical about these reforms. Why did I now doubt ideas I once had advocated?

The short answer is that my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality. When someone chastised John Maynard Keynes for reversing himself about a particular economic policy he had previously endorsed, he replied, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"[1] This comment may or may not be apocryphal, but I admire the thought behind it. It is the mark of a sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice.

The task of sorting my articles gave me the opportunity to review what I had written at different times, beginning in the mid-1960s. As I read and skimmed and remembered, I began to see two themes at the center of what I have been writing for more than four decades. One 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, especially in history and literature, both of which are so frequently ignored, trivialized, or politicized.[2]

Over the years, I have consistently warned against the lure of "the royal road to learning," the notion that some savant or organization has found an easy solution to the problems of American education. As a historian of education, I have often studied the rise and fall of grand ideas that were promoted as the sure cure for whatever ills were afflicting our schools and students. I have tried to show in my work the persistence of our national infatuation with fads, movements, and reforms, which invariably distract us from the steadiness of purpose needed to improve our schools.

In our own day, policymakers and business leaders have eagerly enlisted in a movement launched by free-market advocates, with the support of major foundations. Many educators have their doubts about the slogans and cure-alls of our time, but they are required to follow the mandates of federal law (such as No Child Left Behind) despite their doubts.

As I flipped through the yellowing pages in my scrapbooks, I started to understand my growing doubt regarding popular proposals for choice and accountability. Once again, I realized, I was turning skeptical in response to panaceas and miracle cures. The only difference was that in this case, I too had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. They promised to end bureaucracy, to ensure that poor children were not neglected, to empower poor parents, to enable poor children to escape failing schools, and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, black and white. Testing would shine a spotlight on low-performing schools, and choice would create opportunities for poor kids to leave for better schools. All of this seemed to make sense, but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. I wanted to share the promise and the hope. I wanted to believe that choice and accountability would produce great results. But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw, the more I lost the faith.

As I watched the choice and accountability movements gain momentum across the nation, I concluded that curriculum and instruction were far more important than choice and accountability. I feared that choice would let thousands of flowers bloom but would not strengthen American education. It might even harm the public schools by removing the best students from schools in the poorest neighborhoods. I was also concerned that accountability had become mechanistic and even antithetical to good education. Testing, I realized with dismay, had become a central preoccupation in the schools and was not just a measure but an end in itself. I came to believe that accountability, as written into federal law, was not raising standards but dumbing down the schools as states and districts strived to meet unrealistic targets.

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It is time, I think, for those who want to improve our schools to focus on the essentials of education. We must make sure that our schools have a strong, coherent, explicit curriculum that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, with plenty of opportunity for children to engage in activities and projects that make learning lively. We must ensure that students gain the knowledge they need to understand political debates, scientific phenomena, and the world they live in. We must be sure they are prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a complex society. We must take care that our teachers are well educated, not just well trained. We must be sure that schools have the authority to maintain both standards of learning and standards of behavior.

We have known for many years that we need to improve our schools. We keep stumbling, however, because there is widespread disagreement about what should be improved, what we mean by improvement, and who should do it. A strong case for improvement was made by *A Nation at Risk*, a major report released in 1983, which warned that our students and our schools were not keeping up with their international peers. Since then, many reports and surveys have demonstrated that large numbers of young people leave school knowing little or nothing about history, literature, foreign languages, the arts, geography, civics, or science. Without knowledge and understanding, one tends to become a passive spectator rather than an active participant in the great decisions of our time.

A democratic society cannot long sustain itself if its citizens are uninformed and indifferent about its history, its government, and the workings of its economy. Nor can it prosper if it neglects to

educate its children in the principles of science, technology, geography, literature, and the arts. The great challenge to our generation is to create a renaissance in education, one that goes well beyond the basic skills that have recently been the singular focus of federal activity, a renaissance that seeks to teach the best that has been thought and known and done in every field of endeavor.

The policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools. Indeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective and may further degrade the intellectual capacity of our citizenry. The schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a multiple-choice test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives, to be responsible citizens, and to make good choices for themselves, their families, and our society.

With the best of intentions, reformers have sought to correct deficiencies by introducing new pedagogical techniques, new ways of organizing classrooms, new technologies, new tests, new incentives, and new ways to govern schools. In every instance, reformers believed that their solution was the very one that would transform the schools, make learning fun, raise test scores, and usher in an age of educational joy or educational efficiency. As one innovation follows another, teachers may be forgiven if, from time to time, they suffer an acute case of reform fatigue.

This constant reform churn is not the approach typically found in countries with successful schools. In November 2006, I attended a meeting of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, an organization of scholars that has been studying school performance in many nations since the 1960s. Two respected testing experts described the lessons learned from decades of mathematics assessments in dozens of nations. As I listened, I copied this list of the essential ingredients of a successful education system: "a strong curriculum; experienced teachers; effective instruction; willing students; adequate resources; and a community that values education."[3] The fundamentals of good education are to be found in the classroom, the home, the community, and the culture, but reformers in the United States continue to look for shortcuts and quick answers.

Far too many reformers imagine that it is easy to create a successful school, but it is not. School improvements—if they are real—occur **incrementally**, as a result of sustained effort over years.

Far too many reformers imagine that it is easy to create a successful school, but it is not. They imagine that the lessons of a successful school are obvious and can be easily transferred to other schools, just as one might take an industrial process or a new piece of machinery and install it in a new plant without error.

More Choices, Higher Scores, and Worse Education

If there is one thing all educators know and many studies have confirmed for decades, it is that there is no single answer to educational improvement. There are no grounds for the claim made in the past decade that accountability all by itself is a silver bullet, nor for the oft-asserted argument that choice by itself is a panacea.

Nonetheless, in the decade following my brief stint as an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education under President George H. W. Bush, I argued that charters and accountability would help reform our schools. Teachers and schools would be judged by their performance; this was a basic principle in the business world. Schools that failed to perform would be closed, just as a corporation would close a branch office that continually produced poor returns. Having been immersed in a world of true believers at the department, I was influenced by their ideas. I became persuaded that the business-minded thinkers were onto something important.

Today, having seen these ideas in action, I see the downsides of both the choice movement and the accountability movement. They are not solutions to our educational dilemmas.

Market Mechanisms: Let 1,000 Flowers Bloom—and 1,000 Wilt?

Charter schools appeal to a broad spectrum of people from the left, the right, and the center, all of whom see charters (as others had previously seen vouchers) as the antidote to bureaucracy and stasis and as the decisive change that could revolutionize American education and dramatically improve educational achievement. Charter schools represent, more than anything else, a concerted effort to deregulate public education, with few restrictions on pedagogy, curriculum, class size, discipline, or other details of their operation.

Have charter schools lived up to the promises of their promoters? Given the wide diversity of charter schools, it's hard to reach a singular judgment about them. In terms of quality, charter schools run the gamut. Some are excellent, some are dreadful, and most are somewhere in between. It is in the nature of markets that some succeed, some are middling, and others fail.

As originally imagined (when Professor Ray Budde[1] and AFT President Albert Shanker[2] each proposed new teacher-developed schools in 1988), charters were intended not to compete with public schools, but to support them. Charters were supposed to be research and development laboratories for discovering better ways of educating hard-to-educate children. They were not intended to siphon away the most motivated students and families in the poorest communities, but to address some of the public schools' most urgent problems.

But a school is successful for many reasons, including the personalities of its leader and teachers; the social interactions among them; the culture of the school; the students and their families; the way the school implements policies and programs dictated by the district, the state, and the federal government; the quality of the school's curriculum and instruction; the resources of the school and the community; and many other factors. When a school is successful, it is hard to know which factor was most important or if it was a combination of factors. Even the principal and teachers may not know for sure. A reporter from the local newspaper may arrive and decide that it must be the principal or a particular program, but the reporter will very likely be wrong. Success, whether defined as high test scores or graduation rates or student satisfaction, cannot be bottled and dispensed at will. This may explain why there are so few examples of low-performing schools that have been "turned around" into high-performing schools. And it may explain why schools are not very good at replicating the success of model schools, whether the models are charters or regular public schools. Certainly, schools can improve and learn from one another, but school improvements—if they are real—occur incrementally, as a result of sustained effort over years.

Our Schools Will *Not* Improve If . . .

Our schools will not improve if we continually reorganize their structure and management without regard for their essential purpose. Our educational problems are a function of our lack of educational vision, not a management problem that requires the enlistment of an army of business consultants. The most durable way to improve schools is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers work and children learn, rather than endlessly squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled. It is not the organization of the schools that is at fault for the ignorance we deplore, but the lack of sound educational values.

Our schools will not improve if elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that properly should be made by professional educators. Congress and state legislatures should not tell teachers how to teach, any more than they should tell surgeons how to perform operations. Nor should the curriculum of the schools be the subject of a political negotiation among people who are neither knowledgeable about teaching nor well educated. Pedagogy—that is, how to teach—is rightly the professional domain of individual teachers. Curriculum—that is, what to teach—should be determined by professional educators and scholars, after due public deliberation, acting with the authority vested in them by schools, districts, or states.

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In their current manifestation, charters are supposed to disseminate the free-market model of competition and choice. Now charters compete for the most successful students in the poorest communities, or they accept all applicants and push the low performers back into the public school system. Either approach further disables regular public schools in those communities by leaving the lowest-performing and least-motivated students to the regular public schools. It matters not that the original proponents of charter schools had different goals. It does matter, though, that charter schools have become, in many communities, a force intended to disrupt the traditional notion of public schooling. The rhetoric of many charter school advocates has come to sound uncannily similar to the rhetoric of voucher proponents and the most rabid haters of public schooling. They often sound as though they want public schools to fail; they want to convert entire districts to charter schools, each with its own curriculum and methods, each with its own private management, all competing for students and public dollars.

If there is one consistent lesson that one gleans by studying school reform over the past century, it is the danger of taking a good idea and expanding it rapidly, spreading it thin. What is stunningly successful in a small setting, nurtured by its founders and brought to life by a cadre of passionate teachers, seldom survives the transition when it is turned into a large-scale reform. Whether charter schools are a sustainable reform, whether they can proliferate and at the same time produce good results, is a question yet to be resolved. Whether there is the will to close low-performing charters remains to be seen. Whether there is an adequate supply of teachers who are willing to work 50-hour weeks is unknown. The biggest unknown is how the multiplication of charter schools will affect public education.

In barely 20 years, the idea of school choice rapidly advanced in the public arena and captivated elite opinion. Given the accumulating evidence of its uneven results, this is surprising. Even more surprising is how few voices have been raised on behalf of the democratic vision of public education.

Why not insist that future charters fulfill their original mission? Why shouldn't they be the indispensable institutions that

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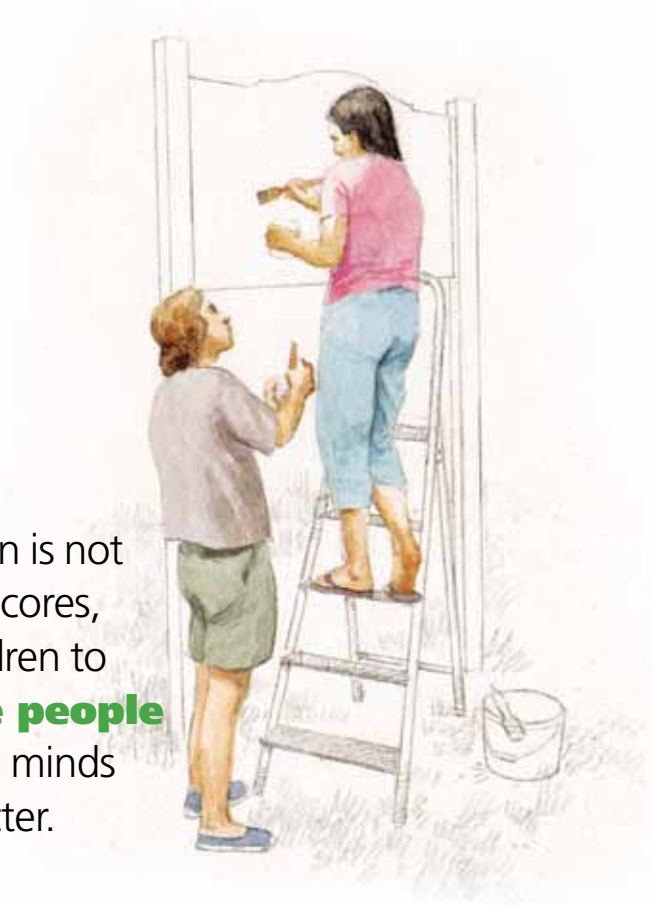
Our schools will not improve if we continue to focus only on reading and mathematics while ignoring the other studies that are essential elements of a good education. Schools that expect nothing more of their students than mastery of basic skills will not produce graduates who are ready for college or the modern workplace. Nor will they send forth men and women prepared to design new technologies, achieve scientific breakthroughs, or accomplish feats of engineering skill. Without a comprehensive liberal arts education, our students will not be prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, nor will they be equipped to make decisions based on knowledge, thoughtful debate, and reason.



The goal of education is not to produce higher scores, but to educate children to become **responsible people** with well-developed minds and good character.

Our schools will not improve if we value only what tests measure. The tests we have now provide useful information about students' progress in reading and mathematics. But what is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavor.

Our schools will not improve if we rely exclusively on tests as the means of deciding the fate of students, teachers, principals, and schools. When tests are the primary means of evaluation and accountability, everyone feels pressure to raise the scores, by hook or by crook. Some will cheat to get a reward or to avoid humiliation. Schools may manipulate who takes the test and who does not; district and state officials may fiddle with the scoring of the test. Districts and states may require intensive test preparation that mirrors the actual state tests and borders on institutionalized cheating.

Our schools will not improve if we continue to close neighborhood schools in the name of reform. Neighborhood schools are often the anchors of their communities, a steady presence that helps to cement the bonds of community among neighbors. Most are places with a history, laden with traditions and memories that help individuals resist fragmentation in their lives. Their graduates return and want to see their old classrooms; they 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 serves no purpose other than to destroy those memories, to sever the building from the culture of its neighborhood, and to erode a sense of community that was decades in the making. Closing a school should be only a last resort and an admission of failure, not by the school or its staff, but by the educational authorities who failed to provide timely assistance.

Our schools will not improve if we entrust them to the magical powers of the market. Markets have winners and losers. Letting a thousand flowers bloom does not guarantee a garden full of flowers. If the garden is untended, unsupervised, and unregulated, it is likely to become overgrown with weeds. Our goal must be to establish school systems that foster academic excellence in every school and every neighborhood.

Our schools cannot improve if charter schools siphon away the most motivated students and their families in the poorest communities from the regular public schools. Continuing on this path will debilitate public education in urban districts and give the illusion of improvement. In exchange for the benefits of deregulation, charter schools should use their autonomy from the usual rules and regulations to show what they can do to educate students who have been unable to learn in a traditional school. In the future, charter schools should be valued partners of traditional public schools. Charter schools should be designed to collaborate with traditional public schools in a common mission: the education of all children. In this mission, they should be allies, not enemies or competitors.

Our schools will not improve if we expect them to act like private, profit-seeking enterprises. Schools are not businesses; they are a public good. The goal of education is not to produce higher scores, but to educate children to become responsible people with well-developed minds and good character. The unrelenting focus on data that has become commonplace in recent years is distorting the nature and quality of education. Competition among schools to get higher scores is sure to cause teachers to spend more time preparing students for state tests, not on thoughtful writing, critical reading, scientific experiments, or historical study. Nor should we expect schools to vie with one another for students, as businesses vie for customers. For schools to learn from one another, they must readily share information about their successes and failures, as medical professionals do, rather than act as rivals in a struggle for survival.

Our schools will not improve if we continue to drive away expe-

rienced principals and replace them with neophytes who have taken a leadership training course but have little or no experience as teachers. The best principals have had a long apprenticeship as educators, first as teachers, then as assistant principals, and finally as principals. If principals have not spent much time as teachers, they are not qualified to judge others' teaching, nor can they assist new teachers.

Our schools cannot be improved by blind worship of data. If the measures are shoddy, then the data will be shoddy. If the data reflect mainly the amount of time invested in test-preparation activities, then the data are worthless. If the data are based on dumbed-down state tests, then the data are meaningless. A good accountability system, whether for schools, teachers, or students, must include a variety of measures, not only test scores.

Our schools cannot be improved by those who say that money doesn't matter. Ample resources do not guarantee success, but it is certainly more difficult for schools to succeed without them. If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, then we will make sure that the schools attended by our neediest students have well-educated teachers, small classes, beautiful facilities, and a curriculum rich in the arts and sciences.

If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we will make sure our **neediest students** have well-educated teachers, small classes, beautiful facilities, and a curriculum rich in the arts and sciences.

Our schools cannot be improved if we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children's ability to learn. Children who have grown up in poverty need extra resources, including preschool and medical care. They need small classes, where they will get extra teacher time, and they need extra learning time. Their families need additional supports, such as coordinated social services that help them to improve their education, to acquire necessary social skills and job skills, and to obtain jobs and housing. While the school itself cannot do these things, it should be part of a web of public and private agencies that buttress families.

Our schools cannot be improved if we use them as society's all-purpose punching bag, blaming them for the ills of the economy, the burdens imposed on children by poverty, the dysfunction of families, and the erosion of civility. Schools must work with other institutions and cannot replace them.

What Will Improve Our Schools?

If we want to improve education, we must first of all have a vision of what good education is. We should have goals that are worth striving for. Everyone involved in educating children should ask themselves why we educate. What is a well-educated person? What knowledge is of most worth? What do we hope for when we send our children to school? What do we want them to learn and accomplish by the time they graduate from high school?

Certainly, we want our children to be able to read and write and be numerate. Those are the basic skills on which all other learning builds. But that is not enough. We want them to be able to think for themselves when they are out in the world on their own. We want them to have good character and to make sound decisions about their life, their work, and their health. We want them to face life's joys and travails with courage and humor. We hope that they will be kind and compassionate in their dealings with others. We want them to have a sense of justice and fairness. We want them to understand our nation and our world and the challenges we face. We want them to be active, responsible citizens, prepared to think issues through carefully, to listen to differing views, and to reach decisions rationally. We want them to learn science and mathematics so they understand the problems of modern life and participate in finding solutions. We want them to enjoy the rich artistic and cultural heritage of our society and other societies.

One could make the list of hoped-for outcomes even longer, but the point should be clear. If these are our goals, the current narrow, utilitarian focus of our national testing regime is not sufficient. Indeed, to the extent that we make the testing regime our master, we may see our true goals recede farther and farther into the distance. By our current methods, we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking that it means only drudgery, worksheets, test preparation, and test taking.

So let us begin with a vision of the education we want for our children and our society. To move toward that vision, we should attend to the quality of the curriculum—that is, what is taught. Every school should have a well-conceived coherent, sequential curriculum. A curriculum is not a script but a set of general guidelines. Students should regularly engage in the study and practice of the liberal arts and sciences: history, literature, geography, the sciences, civics, mathematics, the arts, and foreign languages, as well as health and physical education.

Having a curriculum does not solve all our educational problems. But not having a curriculum indicates our unwillingness or inability to define what we are trying to accomplish. To paraphrase the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. The curriculum is a starting point for other reforms. It informs teachers, students, parents, teacher educators, assessment developers, textbook publishers, technology providers, and others about the goals of instruction. It provides direction, clarity, and focus around worthy ends, without interfering with teachers' decisions about how to teach.

If we are willing to learn from top-performing nations, such as Japan and Finland,[4] we should establish a substantive national curriculum that declares our intention to educate all children in the full range of liberal arts and sciences, as well as physical education. This curriculum would designate the essential knowledge and skills that students need to learn. In the last two years of high school, there should be career and technical studies for students who plan to enter the workforce after high school graduation. But they too should study the arts and sciences, so that they too may gain a sense of life's possibilities. Because we are all citizens of this democracy, because we will all be voters, we must all be educated for our responsibilities.

If we are willing to learn from top-performing nations, we should establish a substantive **national curriculum** that designates the essential knowledge and skills students need to learn.

Some will object that a country as diverse as ours can't possibly have a national curriculum. The counterargument is that our nation had a de facto curriculum for most of the 19th century, when the textbooks in each subject were interchangeable. For the first half of the 20th century as well, we had an implicit national curriculum that was decisively shaped by the college entrance examinations of the College Board; its highly respected examinations were based on a specific and explicit syllabus, designed by teachers and professors of each subject.

But what about the culture wars that will surely erupt if there is any attempt to decide what will be taught and learned in any subject? We can now see, with the passage of years, that it is possible to forge a consensus in every contested subject-matter terrain if the various factions accept the necessity of working together and the futility of trying to impose their views on everyone else.

There is reason to hope that the curriculum wars of the 1990s have ended, not in a victory for either side, but in a truce. Where once there were warring partisans of whole language and phonics, now there is a general recognition that children need both. Beginning readers must learn the sounds and symbols of language, and they should learn to love reading by hearing and reading wonderful literature. I would go further, to insist that all children should learn grammar, spelling, and syntax, which will enable them to write well and communicate their ideas clearly.[5]

Furthermore, I suggest a short reading list—not more than 10 titles—of indispensable literary classics for each grade. Back in the days of the culture wars, it was taken as a given that any list would be oppressive, exclusive, and elitist. One hopes we have moved beyond those contentious times and can at last identify essential writings that have stood the test of time and continue to be worthy of our attention.

Without the effort to teach our common cultural heritage, we risk losing it and being left with nothing in common but an evanescent and often degraded popular culture. Let us instead read, reflect on, and debate the ideas of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson,

W. E. B. Du Bois, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Lewis Carroll, and many others whose writings remain important because of their ideas, their beauty, or their eloquence. Let us be sure that our students read the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other basic documents of our nation's founding and development. Classic literature coexists happily with contemporary writings, especially when students are encouraged to engage in discussions about timeless issues such as the conflict between freedom and authority, the conflict between the rights of society and the rights of the individual, and the persistent dilemmas of the human condition. I do not suggest that it will be easy to shape lists of essential readings for every grade, only that it is necessary not to shirk this obligation if we wish to have excellent education for all. An English language arts curriculum without literature—real, named books of lasting importance—is no English curriculum at all.

In mathematics, the wars of the 1990s between traditionalists and constructivists have also subsided, although they flare up from time to time when parents discover that their children can't add or subtract. Many districts that mandate constructivist programs now realize that they must also teach basic mathematical computation. A consensus is possible. The results of international assessments, on which American students have faltered over the years, have helped us to understand the importance of avoiding extremes and unnecessary polarization.

In the sciences, the ingredients for a solid, sequential curriculum are at hand, based on work already completed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Project 2061 and the National Research Council. Students should study science in every grade, but this is hard to achieve when there are not enough science teachers. The study of science is also hobbled by the theological and political debate about evolution, which shadows every effort to devise science curricula on a statewide basis. Education authorities must separate teaching about science from teaching about religion. Science classes should teach science, as validated by scholarship, and religion classes should teach religion. This principle cannot be compromised without doing injury to both fields of study.

Even history can be rescued from the culture wars, which now, one hopes, are a distant memory. Massachusetts, California, and a few other states have demonstrated that it is possible to develop a history curriculum that is challenging and lively.

At present, most students plod dutifully and unenthusiastically through obligatory textbooks of 1,000 or more pages stuffed with facts but lacking in narrative or intellectual excitement. The great stories of brave men and women, of heroes and villains, of tragic decisions and extraordinary deeds, are gone. The textbooks avoid controversy—which would hurt sales—and maintain a studied air of neutrality, thus ensuring the triumph of dullness.

One of the few states with an excellent curriculum in every subject is Massachusetts. Perhaps not coincidentally, its students have the **highest academic performance** in the nation.

History should be as exciting to young people as anything on television, but their textbooks turn it into a listless parade of names, themes, wars, and nations. Among all the subjects tested by the federal government, U.S. history is the one in which American students register the worst performance, even though almost all students are required to study it.[6] To restore excitement and vitality to this subject, teachers and curriculum designers must raise questions, provoke debates, explore controversies, and encourage the use of primary documents, narratives written by master historians, biographies, documentaries, and other visual records of important events and personalities. Biographies are a terrific way to introduce elementary-age children to history.

In the arts, we should agree that all children deserve the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument, sing, engage in dramatic events, dance, paint, sculpt, and study the great works of artistic endeavor from other times and places. Through the arts, children learn discipline, focus, passion, and the sheer joy of creativity. We should make sure that these opportunities and the resources to support them are available to every student in every school.

Many educators and parents worry that a national curriculum might be captured by "the wrong people," that is, someone whose views they do not share. I too worry that a national curriculum might be no better than the vacuum that now exists, might fail to lift our sights, and might fail to release us from the shackles of test-based accountability. Thus, any national curriculum must be both nonfederal and voluntary, winning the support of districts and states because of its excellence.

If it is impossible to reach consensus about a national curriculum, then every state should make sure that every child receives an education that includes history, geography, literature, the arts, the sciences, civics, foreign languages, health, and physical education. These subjects should not be discretionary or left to chance. Every state should have a curriculum that is rich in knowledge,

issues, and ideas, while leaving teachers free to use their own methods, with enough time to introduce topics and activities of their own choosing. That would avoid unnecessary duplication from grade to grade and would guarantee that children in different districts—rural, suburban, and urban—are getting access to the same opportunities to learn.

One of the few states with an excellent curriculum in every subject is Massachusetts. Perhaps not coincidentally, students in Massachusetts have the highest academic performance in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and rank near the top when compared with their peers in other nations. When Massachusetts participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007, its fourth-graders placed second in the world in science, surpassed only by Singapore, and its eighth-graders tied for first in the world in science with students in Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Japan, and Korea.[7]

When students in Minnesota took the TIMSS tests, eighth-graders tied with Singapore in earth science; in mathematics, their performance was mediocre, like the nation's. William Schmidt, the U.S. coordinator for TIMSS, said that Minnesota has a strong curriculum in earth science, but not in mathematics. The lesson, he concluded, is that American students "can be the best in the world when we give them a curriculum that is focused and coher-

A Note on Teacher Unions

Critics of teacher unions seem to be more plentiful now than ever before. Supporters of choice and vouchers see the unions as the major obstacle to their reforms. The *Wall Street Journal* regularly publishes editorials in opposition to teacher unionism, and the business press can be counted on to blame the unions for whatever is wrong with the schools. One would think, by reading the critics, that the nation's schools are overrun by incompetent teachers who hold their jobs only because of union protections, that unions are directly responsible for poor student performance, and that academic achievement would soar if the unions were to disappear.*

This is unfair. No one, to my knowledge, has demonstrated a clear, indisputable correlation between teacher unionism and academic achievement, either negative or positive. The Southern states, where teacher unions have historically been either weak or nonexistent, have always had the poorest student performance on national examinations. Massachusetts, the state with the highest academic performance, has long had strong teacher unions. The difference in performance is probably due to economics, not unionization. Where there are affluent communities, student performance tends to be higher, whether or not their teachers belong to unions. Some of the top-performing nations in the world are highly unionized; others are not. Finland, whose students score highest on international assessments of reading, has a teacher workforce that is nearly 100 percent unionized. Most high-performing Asian nations do not have large proportions of unionized teachers (though some do). Unionization per se does not cause high student achievement, nor does it cause low achievement.

While I have never been a member of any union, I was a friend of Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, whom I met after my history of the New York City schools was published. His successor, Sandra Feldman, was also my friend, and I am friends with her successor, Randi Weingarten, who was elected AFT president in 2008. At the behest of the AFT, I traveled to Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990, as the Cold War ended, to meet with teachers and talk about civic education and democracy in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. I worked with the leaders of Teachers Solidarity in Poland, which opposed the Communist regime and its puppet unions. As a result of these experiences, I came to believe that teachers, like other working people, should have the right to organize and to bargain collectively for their compensation, working conditions, and right to due process. Moreover, as a historian, I recognize the importance of the labor movement as a political force that has improved the lives of working people in many sectors of American life, including education.

Critics say the union contract makes it impossible for administrators to get rid of bad teachers. The union says it protects teachers against arbitrary dismissals. To be sure, it is not easy to fire a tenured teacher, but it can be done so long as there is due process in hearing the teacher's side of the story.

District officials should **collaborate**, rather than use the union as a scapegoat for low performance.

But the issue should not take years to resolve. The AFT, which represents most urban school districts, has supported peer review programs, in which teachers evaluate other teachers, offer to help them become better teachers, and, if they do not improve, "counsel them out" of the profession. When it comes to decisions about terminating a teacher, unions want to be part of the decision-making process. It is not in the interest of their members to have incompetent teachers in their midst, passing along poorly educated students to the next teacher. Since unions are not going to disappear, district officials should collaborate with them to develop a fair and expeditious process for removing incompetent teachers, rather than using the union as a scapegoat for low performance or for conditions in the school and society that are beyond the teachers' control. –D.R.

*Terry M. Moe, "No Teacher Left Behind," *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2005.

ent and that is delivered by teachers well trained in the content being offered at that level."[8]

If our nation or states have a good curriculum, we must ensure that our assessment systems reflect and reinforce what is taught. There is a maxim among educators that "what gets tested is what gets taught." The assessments used in our schools should be as good as the curriculum. I do not seek to abolish standardized, multiple-choice tests; they give a useful snapshot of student performance at a specific point in time. But they are not sufficient to measure student learning. To lift the quality of education, we must encourage schools to use measures of educational accomplishment that are appropriate to the subjects studied, such as research papers in history, essays and stories in literature, research projects in science, demonstrations of mathematical competence, videotaped or recorded conversations in a foreign language, performances in the arts, and other exhibitions of learning.

Nor should test scores be the sole measure of the quality of a school. Every state should establish inspection teams to evaluate the physical and educational condition of its schools, to ensure that a full curriculum is taught (not only the tested subjects), and to review the quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors should judge teaching and learning by observing it, not by using checklists to note whether students have "learning goals," teachers have "data binders," schools have "data inquiry teams," or other nonsensical requirements based on the jargon of the day.

The goal of evaluation should not be to identify schools that must be closed, but to identify schools that need help. The job of educational authorities is to solve problems, not evade them by shuttering schools. When schools are struggling, the authorities should do whatever is necessary to improve them. This may mean professional development for teachers, smaller classes, targeted programs in reading or other subjects, afterschool activities, additional tutoring for students, extra supervisors, a better disciplinary policy, parent education classes, and other interventions that will strengthen the school's capacity to educate its students.

The goal of evaluation should be to identify schools that need help. The job of educational authorities is to **solve problems**, not evade them by shuttering schools.

With a strong and comprehensive curriculum and a fair assessment and evaluation system in place, the schools must have teachers who are well qualified to teach the curriculum. Teachers must be well educated and know their subjects. To impart a love of learning, they should love learning and love teaching what they know. They should have professional training to learn how to teach what they know, how to manage a classroom, and how to handle the kinds of issues and problems they are likely to encounter as classroom teachers. As in many other aspects of education, we do not have ways to quantify whether a teacher loves learning, but we have some important signposts, such as their education, their command of the subject, and their skill in the classroom. Prospective teachers should be tested on their knowledge of what they will teach, and new teachers should be regularly evaluated by their supervisors and peers.

To attract and retain the teachers we need, schools must offer compensation that reflects the community's respect for them as professionals. Many districts are trying various forms of performance pay, and we should watch those experiments closely. Some districts will offer higher salaries to attract teachers in fields where there are chronic shortages, such as science and mathematics. Others may offer bonuses to those who perform extra assignments. Differential pay schemes are in flux and are likely to continue changing for several years, as we learn more from current efforts. But whatever the results may be, no manipulation of salary schedules will suffice to overcome the absence of a sound curriculum, willing students, supportive parents, collegial administrators, and good working conditions.

If our schools had an excellent curriculum, appropriate assessments, and well-educated teachers, we would be way ahead of where we are now in renewing our school system. But even that would not be enough to make our schools all that they should be. Schools do not exist in isolation. They are part of the larger society. Schooling requires the active participation of many, including stu-

dents, families, public officials, local organizations, and the larger community. As every educator knows, families are children's first teachers. On the very first day of school, there are wide differences in children's readiness to learn. Some children have educated parents; some do not. Some come from homes with books, newspapers, magazines, and other reading materials; some do not. Some parents encourage their children to do their schoolwork and set aside a place and a time for them to study; some do not. Some parents take their children to the library, zoo, museum, and other places of learning; some do not. As a result of different experiences in early childhood, some children begin school with a large vocabulary; some do not.

Researchers Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley studied the language development of young children and found a huge disparity between children from impoverished families and children from professional families.[9] Before the age of 3, children from the advantaged families had vastly more exposure to words and encouragement than children who grew up in poor households.* Their study implies the need for early intervention, even before the age of 3, as well as intensive adult education for parents.

Families must do their part to get children ready for school. Families implant basic attitudes and values about learning, as well as the self-discipline and good manners necessary for learning in a group. Families must remain involved with their children, encourage them, monitor their schoolwork, limit the time they spend with electronic devices, meet with their teachers, and see that they have a regular place to study. They must encourage them to take their schooling seriously, respect their teachers, and behave appropriately in school.

Schools must teach and enforce standards of civility, and teach students to respect themselves and others, or they cannot provide a safe, orderly environment, which is necessary for learning. Schools must restore the historic tradition of public schools as places where students learn good behavior, good citizenship, and the habits of mind that promote thoughtfulness and learning.

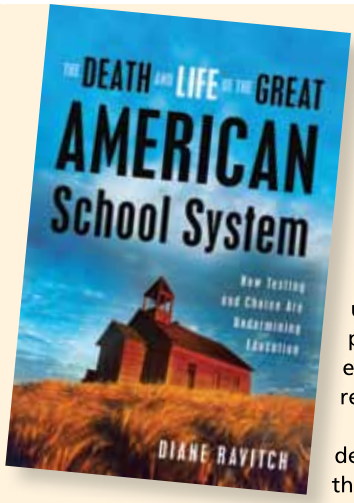
Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality. We must **revive** the conditions that make **learning** possible.

As a nation, we need a strong and vibrant public education system. As we seek to reform our schools, we must take care to do no harm. In fact, we must take care to make our public schools once again the pride of our nation. Our public education system is a fundamental element of our democratic society. Our public schools have been the pathway to opportunity and a better life for generations of Americans, giving them the tools to fashion their own life and to improve the commonweal. To the extent that we strengthen them, we strengthen our democracy.

At the present time, public education is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. We must turn our attention to improving the schools, infusing them with the substance of genuine learning and reviving the conditions that make learning possible. ☐

(Endnotes on page 42)

*To learn more, see "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, in the Spring 2003 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm.



This book is my opportunity to explain what I have learned about school reform and to suggest, with (I hope) a certain degree of modesty and full acknowledgment of my own frailties and errors, what is needed to move American education in the right direction. Though at first it may seem dramatic, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* is the title of my dreams. It is a fitting homage to Jane Jacobs, whose book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* helped to create a renaissance in the nation's cities. Since I live the life that she wrote about, in a wonderful urban neighborhood saved by historic preservation, I love the idea of associating my book with hers, most especially with the hope that American education in general, and urban education in particular, might also experience a renaissance.

In the book, I describe the evidence that changed my views about reforms that once seemed promising. I explain why I have concluded that most of the reform strategies that school districts, state officials, the Congress, and federal officials are pursuing, that mega-rich foundations are supporting, and that editorial boards are applauding are mistaken. I explain how these mistaken policies are corrupting educational values. I describe the policies that I believe are necessary ingredients in a good system of public education. I do not claim that my ideas will solve all our problems all at once and forever. I do claim, however, that we must preserve American public education, because it is so intimately connected to our concepts of citizenship and democracy and to the promise of American life.

–D.R.

To learn more about Diane Ravitch, or to e-mail her your thoughts on The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, go to* ***www.dianeravitch.com****.*

Renaissance

(Continued from page 22)

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(Continued from page 28)

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