Review of "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" and "America's Public Schools: From the Common School to No Child Left Behind"

Michelle Stacy
Mascoutah High School

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, and the Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol71/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
Diane Ravitch’s *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* comes at a time when education is yet again at a crossroads. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Bush administration’s comprehensive school reform program, is currently being reformed into President Obama’s “Race to the Top.” Ravitch, former assistant secretary of Education under George W. Bush, famously supported NCLB. Ten years after NCLB’s implementation, school districts across the country have become “test obsessed,” waiting in anticipation for their scores to measure annual yearly progress (AYP). Through her research, Ravitch argues that NCLB has been ultimately ineffective and countless school districts have completely revamped their school programs to essentially “teach to the test.” Instead of focusing on testing, Ravitch argues that schools should focus on rigorous standards within each discipline. Ravitch critiques current NCLB school reform through her analysis of school districts in New York and San Diego and charter schools.

The charter school movement, promoted as an alternative to failing public schools is effectively criticized by Ravitch. Both liberals and conservatives that value school choice have embraced charter schools. Ravitch describes how charter schools often do not have better standardized test scores than public schools and many even perform worse on those same tests. In order for actual comprehensive school reform to occur, Ravitch argues for curriculum grounded in national, discipline-specific standards, appropriate testing measures, and well-educated teachers who have a substantial educational background in their discipline. This book is essential for school administrators and teacher educators looking to make an actual difference in their school communities.

An interesting companion piece to Ravitch’s work is William J. Reece’s *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to No Child Left Behind*. Reece blends the history of education with the broader political, social, and economic history of America. This book provides a detailed introductory foundation to the history of education in America. Reece helps his readers understand the historical influences that shaped the development of schools. Reece highlights that many of the current debates about school funding, curriculum and testing have been played out in previous eras, particularly during the Progressive Era. Perhaps those currently involved in these issues should get their own history lesson by reading Reece’s book. Reece’s *America’s Public Schools* would be quite useful in an introductory course on the history of American education or educational foundations. It would also be an interesting read for current teachers looking to form a book group at their schools. This book gives thoughtful perspective on our public school system and its history.

Michelle Stacy
Mascoutah High School