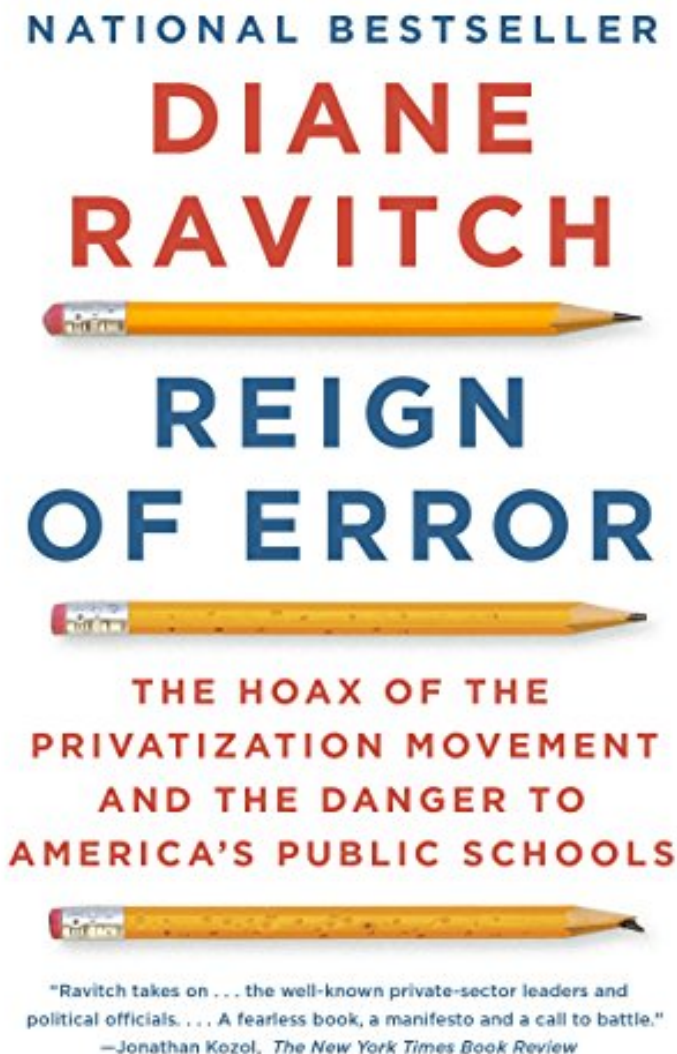


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# Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools



Par Diane Ravitch  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom one of the foremost authorities on education in the United States, former U.S. assistant secretary of education, whistle-blower extraordinaire (The Wall Street Journal), author of the best-selling *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*(Important and rivetingLibrary Journal),*The Language Police*(Impassioned . . . Fiercely argued . . . Every bit as alarming as it is

illuminating (The New York Times), and other notable books on education history and policy an incisive, comprehensive look at today's American school system that argues against those who claim it is broken and beyond repair; an impassioned but reasoned call to stop the privatization movement that is draining students and funding from our public schools. In *Reign of Error*, Diane Ravitch argues that the crisis in American education is not a crisis of academic achievement but a concerted effort to destroy public schools in this country. She makes clear that, contrary to the claims being made, public school test scores and graduation rates are the highest they've ever been, and dropout rates are at their lowest point. She argues that federal programs such as George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind and Barack Obama's Race to the Top set unreasonable targets for American students, punish schools, and result in teachers being fired if their students underperform, unfairly branding those educators as failures. She warns that major foundations, individual billionaires, and Wall Street hedge fund managers are encouraging the privatization of public education, some for idealistic reasons, others for profit. Many who work with equity funds are eyeing public education as an emerging market for investors. *Reign of Error* begins where *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* left off, providing a deeper argument against privatization and for public education, and in a chapter-by-chapter breakdown, putting forth a plan for what can be done to preserve and improve it. She makes clear what is right about U.S. education, how policy makers are failing to address the root causes of educational failure, and how we can fix it. For Ravitch, public school education is about knowledge, about learning, about developing character, and about creating citizens for our society. It is about helping to inspire independent thinkers, not just honing job skills or preparing people for college. Public school education is essential to our democracy, and its aim, since the founding of this country, has been to educate citizens who will help carry democracy into the future.

**CHAPTER 2 The Context for Corporate Reform**

Federal law and policy turned the education reform movement of the twenty-first century into a powerful force that no school or district dared to ignore. Since the publication in 1983 of a report called *A Nation at Risk*, federal and state policy makers have searched for policy levers with which to raise academic performance. That report was the product of a commission called the National Commission on Excellence in Education appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. The commission warned that the nation was endangered by a rising tide of mediocrity in the schools; it pointed to the poor standing of American students on international tests, a recurring phenomenon since the first international test was offered in the mid-1960s. Its basic claim was that the American standard of living was threatened by the loss of major manufacturing industries such as automobiles, machine tools, and steel mills to other nations, which the commission attributed to the mediocre quality of our public educational system; this claim shifted the blame from shortsighted corporate leadership to the public schools. The commission called for better curriculum standards, higher graduation requirements, better teacher training, higher teacher pay, and other customary improvements. The commission said very little about testing, accountability, and choice. The first Bush administration, in which I served, had little appetite for an expanded federal role in education. It announced a program called *America 2000*, which relied mainly on voluntarism since a Democratic Congress would not consider any education bills sponsored by President George H. W. Bush. Congressional Democrats in the early 1990s wanted greater resources and greater equity in public schools, not standards and tests. The Clinton administration liked the idea of national standards and national testing, but when Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, that idea died. The administration settled for a program called *Goals 2000*, which offered money to states to set their own standards and tests. Along came the George W. Bush administration in 2001, which proposed sweeping federal legislation called *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*. On the campaign trail, Bush spoke of the Texas miracle, claiming that testing and accountability had led to startling improvements in student performance. He said that test scores and graduation rates were up, and the achievement gap was narrowing, thanks to the Texas reforms. We now know that there was no such miracle; Texas made some increases on federal tests, like many other states, but its students register at the national average, nowhere near the top. In 2001, no one listened to those who warned that the Texas miracle was an illusion.<sup>1</sup> Congress swiftly passed the law, which dramatically changed the federal role in education. The law declared that all states must test every child annually in grades 3 through 8 in reading and mathematics and report test scores by race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, and limited-English proficiency. By the year 2014, all students were supposed to achieve proficiency on state tests. The states were required to monitor every school to see if every group was on track to reach proficiency. Any school that persistently failed to meet its annual target would be labeled a school in need of improvement (in the eyes of the media and thus the

public, that means a failing school). With each year that the school failed to meet its target, the sanctions became increasingly more punitive. Eventually, if the school kept failing, it was at risk of having its staff fired or having the school closed, handed over to state control or private management, or turned into a charter school or any other major restructuring. Many schools failed year after year, and as 2014 approached, the majority of public schools in the nation had been declared failures, including some excellent, highly regarded schools (typically, the group that was not making sufficient progress toward 100 percent proficiency was students with disabilities, and the schools that were likeliest to be labeled as failing enrolled high proportions of poor and minority students). In Massachusetts, for example, the state with the nations highest-performing students as judged by federal tests, 80 percent of the states public schools were failing by NCLB standards in 2012. Lets be clear: 100 percent proficiency is an impossible goal; no nation in the world has ever achieved this, nor has any other nation ever passed legislation to punish its schools for not reaching an unattainable goal. It was as though Congress had passed a law saying that every city in America should be crime-free. Who could disapprove of such a laudable goal? What city would not want to be crime-free? But imagine if the law set a deadline twelve years off and said that any city that did not meet the goal would be punished; its police stations would be closed and privatized; its police officers would lose their badges. The first to close would be the police stations in the poorest neighborhoods, where crime rates were highest. Eventually, the scythe would swing even in affluent neighborhoods, because no city is completely crime-free. Wishing that it might be so, or passing laws to require that it be so, does not make it so. NCLB opened the door to huge entrepreneurial opportunities. Federal funds were set aside for after-school tutoring, and thousands of tutoring companies sprang up overnight to claim a share. Many new ventures opened to advise schools on how to meet NCLB testing targets, how to analyze NCLB data, how to turn around failing schools, and how to meet other goals embedded in the legislation. NCLB encouraged the growth of the charter sector by proposing that charter schools were a remedy for failing public schools. When NCLB was passed, charters were a new and untested idea. The original idea for charters was first suggested in 1988, not to promote competition, but to allow teachers to try out new ideas. One of its originators, Ray Budde, was a professor at the University of Massachusetts who envisioned charters run by teachers, free to teach without interference by the local district bureaucracy. The other originator was Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who envisioned charters where teachers sought out the lowest-performing students, the dropouts, and the disengaged, then figured out innovative ways to ignite their interest in education. Both these men, unknown to each other, saw charters as schools empowered to devise innovative practices and ready to collaborate and share what they had learned with their colleagues and existing schools. Certainly, neither imagined a charter sector that was nearly 90 percent non-union or one that in some states presented profit-making opportunities for entrepreneurs. Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1991, and the first charter school opened in 1992. Only nine years later, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind law, recommending conversion of a low-performing school to a charter as a remedy. At the time, there was no evidence that charters would succeed where the local public school had failed.

Nonetheless, the congressional endorsement was valuable publicity for charters, which gained public recognition and new opportunities to expand and compete with neighborhood public schools for higher test scores. In addition, it paved the way for federal appropriations and federal tax breaks for charter school construction. As 2014 neared, states were spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on testing and on test preparation materials; the schools in some districts and states were allocating 20 percent of the school year to preparing for state tests. This misallocation of scarce resources was hardly surprising, because schools lived or died depending on their test scores. Educators and parents raised their voices against the incessant testing, but no one seemed to know how to stop it. Some states not only tested children in grades 3 through 8, as NCLB required, but started testing children in the early grades and in prekindergarten to ready them for the testing that began in the third grade. And the number of tests administered to high school students increased as well, both as a measure of progress and as a condition for graduation. Texas, the epicenter of the testing fetish, insisted that students needed to pass fifteen different tests to get a high school diploma. The thirst for data became unquenchable. Policy makers in Washington and the state capitals apparently assumed that more testing would produce more learning. They were certain that they needed accountability and could not imagine any way to hold schools accountable without test scores. This unnatural focus on testing produced perverse but predictable results: it narrowed the curriculum; many districts scaled back time for the arts, history, civics, physical education, science, foreign language, and whatever was not tested. Cheating scandals occurred in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and other districts. States

like New York manipulated the passing score on state tests to inflate the results and bring them closer to Washington's unrealistic goal. Teaching to the test, once considered unprofessional and unethical, became common practice in the age of NCLB. Districts invested many millions of dollars in test preparation materials to help teachers do it better. Under pressure to get higher scores to save their jobs and their schools, teachers drilled students in how to take tests and taught them the types of questions that had been used on previous tests and were likely to appear again. NCLB remained on the books year after year, long after it was due to be revised, reauthorized, or scrapped in 2007. Congress was deadlocked and unable to escape a trap of its own devising. No one seemed able to imagine a federal education policy that did not rely on testing, that did not demand measures to hold schools accountable for failure to produce quantifiable results. No one seemed to remember that this had not been the federal role before 2002, when NCLB was signed into law. Even though the Texas miracle was long ago forgotten, the federal law that mimicked the Texas model remained in force. With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, many educators expected a change in federal education policy. Their hopes were dashed, however, by Obama's education policies, specifically his Race to the Top competition. At the beginning of the new president's term, Congress passed economic stimulus funding in response to the financial collapse of 2008. Congress set aside \$100 billion for education. Of the total, \$95 billion was allocated to keep teachers employed, to offset the shrinkage of state and local budgets. The remaining \$5 billion was used to fund a competition among the states, called Race to the Top. Secretary Arne Duncan set the conditions. To be eligible, states had to agree to adopt new common standards and tests (the Common Core State Standards); expand the number of charter schools; evaluate the effectiveness of teachers in significant part by the test scores of their students (and remove any statutory barriers to doing so); and agree to turn around their lowest-performing schools by taking such dramatic steps as firing staff and closing the schools. Eleven states and the District of Columbia won Race to the Top funding. Dozens of states competed for the funds, all of them accepting the premises of the competition so they could be eligible to win the millions of federal dollars at a time of deep fiscal distress. By dangling the chance to win millions of dollars before hard-pressed states, the Obama administration leveraged changes across the nation, aligning state education policies with the requirements of Race to the Top. Among the premises of Race to the Top was that charter schools and school choice were necessary reforms; that standardized testing was the best way to measure the progress of students and the quality of their teachers, principals, and schools; and that competition among schools would improve them. It also gave a bipartisan stamp of approval to the idea that a low-performing school could be improved by firing the staff, closing the school, and starting over with a new name and a new staff. All of these ideas were highly contested; not one has a strong body of evidence or research to support it or to justify the imposition of so many different and untested changes at the same time. But with the joint imprimatur of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, advocates of standardized testing, school choice, merit pay, and tough accountability measures like school closings heralded these measures as reforms. Race to the Top was only marginally different from No Child Left Behind. In fact, it was worse, because it gave full-throated Democratic endorsement to the long-standing Republican agenda of testing, accountability, and choice. Race to the Top abandoned equity as the driving principle of federal aid. From the initiation of federal aid to local school districts in 1965, Democratic administrations had insisted on formula grants, which distributed federal money to schools and districts based on the proportion of students who were poor, not on a competition among states. The Obama administration shifted gears and took the position that competition was a better way to award federal funding. This change worked in favor of advantaged states and districts that could hire professional grant writers to compete for federal funding. In many cases, the Bill Melinda Gates Foundation gave grants to hire professionals to develop applications for specific states, which tilted the field toward the applicants favored by Gates. By picking a few winners, the Race to the Top competition abandoned the traditional idea of equality of educational opportunity, where federal aid favored districts and schools that enrolled students with the highest needs. The new billions of federal funding encouraged entrepreneurs to enter the education market. Almost overnight, consultants and vendors offered their services to advise districts and states on how to design teacher evaluation systems, how to train teachers, how to train principals, how to turn around failing schools, how to use new technologies, how to engage in data-driven decision making, on and on. With the adoption of the Common Core standards by almost every state, education publishers hurried to align their products with the new standards, entrepreneurs began developing technology to support the Common Core standards, and even more consultants hung out their shingles to sell their services to districts and states about how to implement the Common Core and how to engage in data collection, data

management, and data analysis. The Denver Post determined that 35 percent of the federal funds allocated to that city in a School Improvement Grant was spent for consultants, not for students or teachers or schools.<sup>2</sup>The U.S. Department of Education awarded \$350 million to two consortia to develop national assessments to measure the new national standards. States and districts will have to make large investments in technology, because the new national assessments will be delivered online. By some estimates, the states will be required to spend as much as \$16 billion to implement the Common Core standards. Unfortunately, neither the Obama administration nor the developers of the Common Core standards thought it necessary to field-test the new standards. They have no idea whether the adoption of the new standards and tests will improve education or how they will affect students who are now performing poorly. State education departments warned that the enhanced rigor of the Common Core would cause test scores to plummet by as much as 30 percent, even in successful districts. Should this occur, the sharp decline in passing rates will reinforce the reformers' claims about our nation's broken education system. This, in turn, will create a burgeoning market for new products and technologies. Some reformers hoped that the poor results of the new tests would persuade even suburban parents to lose faith in their community schools and demand not only new products but school closings, charters, and vouchers.<sup>3</sup>This burst of entrepreneurial activity was planned. Joanne Weiss, Secretary Duncan's chief of staff, formerly the director of Duncan's Race to the Top competition, wrote an article in which she described the imperative to match entrepreneurs with school systems. Weiss had previously been the chief operating officer at the NewSchools Venture Fund, which invests in new charter schools and new technology ventures. Race to the Top, she wrote, was designed to scale up entrepreneurial activity, to encourage the creation of new markets for both for-profit and nonprofit investors. The new standards were a linchpin to match smart capital to educational innovation: The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.<sup>4</sup>And indeed the investment opportunities seemed to grow by leaps and bounds after the Obama administration launched its Race to the Top. There were not only high-priced consultants and experts to assist in complying with new federal demands but additional ways to invest in new technologies and the growth industry of charter schools. Equity investors held conferences to discuss the expanded opportunities for making a profit in the public education sector.<sup>5</sup> The tennis star Andre Agassi formed a partnership with an equity investing firm to raise \$750 million in capital to build at least seventy-five charter schools for forty thousand or more students. This was not philanthropy; it was a profit-making venture.<sup>6</sup> Investors quickly figured out that there was money to be made in the purchase, leasing, and rental of space to charter schools, and an aggressive for-profit charter sector emerged wherever it was permitted by state law; in states where for-profit charters were not allowed, nonprofit charters hired for-profit operators to run their schools. Technology companies competed to develop new applications for the new Common Core State Standards, and there appeared to be many exciting opportunities to make money in the emerging education marketplace.<sup>7</sup> This was the first time in history that the U.S. Department of Education designed programs with the intent of stimulating private sector investors to create for-profit ventures in American education. The combination of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top redefined the meaning of education reform. In this new environment, education reformers support testing, accountability, and choice. Education reformers rely on data derived from standardized testing. Education reformers insist that all children be proficient (NCLB) or increase their test scores every year (Race to the Top), or their schools and teachers are failures. Education reformers accept no excuses. Education reformers believe that schools improve if they are forced to compete. Education reformers believe that teachers will produce higher test scores if they are incentivized by merit pay. Education reformers use testing data to fire principals and teachers and to close schools. Education reformers applaud private management of public schools. Education reformers support the proliferation of for-profit organizations into school management. Education reformers don't care about teacher credentials or experience, because some economists say they don't raise test scores. Education reformers in the early twenty-first century believe that school quality and teacher quality may best be measured by test scores. Once upon a time, education reformers thought deeply about the relationship between school and society. They thought about child development as the starting point for education. In those days, education reformers recognized the important role of the family in the education of children. Many years ago, education reformers demanded desegregation. They debated how to improve curriculum

and instruction and what the content of the curriculum should be. But that was long ago. Those concerns were no longer au courant. Now there was bipartisan consensus around the new definition of education reform. Those who held the levers of power at the U.S. Department of Education, in the big foundations, on Wall Street, and in the major corporations agreed on how to reform American education. The debates about the role of schooling in a democratic society, the lives of children and families, and the relationship between schools and society were relegated to the margins as no longer relevant to the business plan to reinvent American education.

1. Jeffrey M. Jones, Confidence in U.S. Public Schools at New Low, Gallup Politics, June 20, 2012.
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3. Bill Gates, Americas High Schools Are Obsolete (speech to the National Governors Association, February 26, 2005).
4. Melinda Gates, interview with Jeffrey Brown and Hari Sreenivasan (video and transcript), NewsHour, PBS, June 4, 2012.
5. Diane Ravitch, The Myth of Charter Schools, New York of Books, November 11, 2010.
6. Joel I. Klein, Condoleezza Rice, and others, U.S. Education Reform and National Security (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2012).
7. Tom Loveless, The 2012 Brown Center Report on American Education, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., February 16, 2012; Tom Loveless, Does the Common Core Matter?, Education Week, April 18, 2012; Diane Ravitch, Do Our Public Schools Threaten National Security?, New York of Books, June 7, 2012.

Revue de presse

The most clear-headed and influential critic of privatization is Diane Ravitch, who has earned a reputation as an independent thinker. Refusing to embrace the formulas of left and right, she attacks politically correct speech codes as intelligently as she criticizes the free-market faith in competition. She has also been willing to change her mind in public: at one time an advocate of standardized testing, she is now a skeptic. And this skepticism animates her broader critique in *Reign of Error*, a book that dispels the clouds of reform rhetoric to reveal the destructiveness of the privatization agenda.

Jackson Lear, *Commonweal* No matter what side of the debate the reader is on, Ms. Ravitch provides a thought-provoking look at some of the major challenges facing public education today.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Those who have grown increasingly alarmed at seeing public education bartered off piece by piece, and seeing schools and teachers thrown into a state of siege, will be grateful for this cri de Coeura fearless book, a manifesto, and a cry to battle.

Jonathan Kozol, *New York Times Book* Ravitch's critique of the corporate reformers manufactured agenda, along with the truly progressive alternatives she offers, shows us a way to begin the long haul toward improving democracy classrooms.

Joseph Featherstone, *The Nation* Diane Ravitch [is] arguably our leading historian of primary and secondary education.

Andrew Delbanco, *The New York of Books* Ravitch has emerged as the most consistent and searching critic of the contemporary education-reform movement.

Walter Russell Mead, *Foreign Affairs* No education or social issues library should be without this book.

Diane C. Donovan, *California Bookwatch* The best word I can come up with to describe the Ravitch of today is muckraking reform-minded journalism that aims to expose misconduct and conspiracy

We need public figures like Ravitch to highlight perilous trends (and illuminate promising trends). . . . *Reign of Error* is a must-read book.

Sam Chaltain, *Education Week* [Ravitch] presents real solutions, not only to improve our public schools, but also to improve the lives of the children who walk their halls.

Darcie Chimarusti, *NewsWorks* [Ravitch] is a devastating social critic who is well aware of the current political environment. Ravitch is able to skewer this agenda so efficiently because shes seen it all before. . . . Ravitch's candor stands in stark contrast to the bromides of the corporate reformers, who have pretty much left any attempts at integration out of their schemes.

NEA.org (National Education Association) Read this book and keep it somewhere within arms length for the next decade or so.

Jose Vilson, *Educator*, writer, activist Diane Ravitch has emerged as an iconic figure on Americas political landscape. What Daniel Ellsberg was to the Vietnam War, Ravitch has become to the battle raging over public education a truth-teller with the knowledge that comes from decades on the inside of the education reform movement.

Anthony Cody, *Education Week Teacher* *Reign of Error* is a must-read; brilliant concise and elegant in dissecting and countering the corporate reform myths. . . . You will never find a more succinct and compelling book than *Reign of Error*, with a crystal clear analysis of the way in which our schools are being driven into the ground by the Billionaire Boys club of Gates, Broad, Walton, Murdoch, and Bloomberg, and other ideologues and opportunists eager to join in. We must win this battle for the soul of our education system before its too late.

NYC Public School Parent Diane Ravitch is Americas foremost educational historian. In each chapter Ravitch provides detailed, clear explanations of the relevant data. . . . She is a thorough and careful scholar. As important as her previous book was, Ravitch has outdone that with this magnum opus. This book is by far her finest work, and something which everyone

truly concerned about education should read. Daily Kos I advise all public school teachers to read Ravitch's book. Her experience makes her writing rich. Reformers do not like her because she exposes them. . . . Her critics attack her personally because they cannot dent the substance that is Ravitch's Reign of Error. She has pulled their reformer pants down in public. There they stand, red-faced and embarrassed. Ravitch is fighting for us. Buy the book. The Huffington Post I knew a lot about what happened to black public schools in Mississippi, but had concerns about how to go about building a better system. After reading Reign of Error I now know exactly how to proceed. Mississippi is indeed the exception that the whole world believes it to be.

I promised God that if I kept living I would spend the rest of my life moving Mississippi blacks from the bottom to the top. Thanks to Diane Ravitch I now know what has to be done. James Meredith, author of Three Years in Mississippi Diane Ravitch is the Martin Luther King and Joan of Arc of American education, a fearless crusader for every American child, parent and teacher. In Reign of Error, she reveals the shocking lack of evidence behind many of the radical experiments being forced on our public school children and families by tragically misguided politicians and non-educators. Most important, she lays out a vision of evidence-based, authentic education reforms that hold great promise for America to lead and inspire the world again. Every American parent, teacher and citizen interested in our future should read this book. What Silent Spring and The Fate of the Earth did for the environmental and antinuclear movements, this book should do for the cause of improving America's public schools." William Doyle, author of A Soldier's

Dream Diane Ravitch's must read book makes a compelling case for the essential purpose of public education. She debunks the myths of its failures and of the market reformers' successes and points to real doable investments that will make public education the gateway to the American dream for all our children. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers Diane Ravitch's Reign of Error takes the myths surrounding public education head on and provides her readers with logic and reasoning sorely missing from the current debate. Diane is a fierce warrior against the so-called reformers whose ideology exacerbates the problems of poverty and inequity. Reign of Error takes on each of the common myths and blows them up with the reformers own holy grail DATA!! Data that disputes the miracle schools, the effects of poverty and myth of the dropout factors. Ravitch also takes on the Billionaire Boys Club with swipes at their handmaidens of destruction, including Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and Wendy Kopp, and the book provides the solutions that will change the trajectory away from so-called destructive innovation towards equitable, high quality education for all children. Karen GJ Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union

American educational reformers have fashioned a narrative that has become so pervasive that it has effectively silenced alternative accounts. In this courageous book Diane Ravitch persuasively challenges both the narrative's presentation and analysis of data and its underlying value system. Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education Harvard Graduate School of Education