

Diane Ravitch's
***The Death and Life of the Great American School System:
How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education***

Study Guide, prepared by Carol Burris

Chapter 1

1. In chapter 1, the author describes the evolution of her thinking about public schooling. She informs the reader that at a particular point in time, she transitioned from a recorder of history to an active participant in shaping educational history.

What events prompted her entrance into the world of policymaking and why did she remain in that world? Why did her belief in corporate reform strategies diminish?

2. Diane Ravitch explains the bipartisan appeal of charter schools and other market based reforms. Although the distance between the Democrats and Republicans on many policy issues has expanded, the support for corporate reforms has grown on both sides of the political spectrum. Identify those aspects of corporate reform that appeal to the left and to the right. Continue to add to your analysis as you read further.

3. On page 5, she discusses the revisionist perspective of public schooling. To what extent might revisionist thinking make reforms, such as charter schools, appeal to liberals? On the other hand, how might a revisionist critique what is presently occurring in market based reform? Continue to look for evidence as you continue reading.

5. Ravitch makes the case that the improvement of curriculum and instruction is more effective in improving the quality of schooling than are changes in structure and governance, such as school choice and accountability measures. As you reflect on your own experiences as an educator, to what extent do you agree with the author? Explain your evidence and reasoning. Which position do you think is more apt to be held by the public and why?

Chapter 2

1. Chapter 2 explains how reform via standards gave way to reform via testing. On page 16, Diane Ravitch asserts her belief that tests should follow curriculum rather than determine it. Discuss how the debate over the content standards for history facilitated the movement from standards to testing. In an era of standards based instruction, how is daily teaching informed? How does the content taught change when accountability testing is included?

2. In summing up the shift to accountability as reform, the author wryly observes "whatever could not be measured, did not count." What are the implications for public schooling and curriculum?

Chapter 3

1. Diane Ravitch recounts the story of New York's District 2 as a complicated story in which a variety of initiatives were conflated with demographic change to create a narrative that caught the attention of corporate reformers. Analyze the story. Which District 2 reforms were admirable? Which do you believe were counterproductive?
2. What should be the cautionary tale for today's corporate reformers? If you were to advise them, what parallels would you draw?

Chapter 4

1. At the end of chapter 4, the author asks important questions about school reform. Discuss those questions as well as the tension that exists between the measurement of learning by test scores and practices that build good school cultures.
2. Researcher Michael Fullan says that sometimes changes in behavior must precede changes in belief. How can school leaders 'push through' reforms without pushing people over? Is there a middle ground between waiting years for consensus and change through intimidation? How might that be accomplished?

Chapter 5

1. Chapter 5 describes a flurry of changes that took place during the Bloomberg administration. What does the Monday Night Massacre tell us about the mayor's style of educational governance? How did the mayor consolidate his power in the face of parent protest over his policies?
2. Describe how populations shifted when the small high school movement took hold. How would those shifts affect the success of large high schools? Smaller high schools?
3. What corporate based reforms emerged under Bloomberg and how did they affect school culture, structures and student achievement.

Chapter 6

1. The author describes NCLB as "measure and punish". To what extent do you agree with that description? What is being measured and who is being punished?
2. According to Diane Ravitch, what accounted for the rise in the test scores of Texas students? What incentives did the testing system create and what were the unintended consequences?
3. What evidence caused the author to lose faith in NCLB? What were the adult interests that were served? In your opinion, what adult interests are being served by Race to the Top?

4. Diane Ravitch identifies the assumptions on which NCLB was built. Are the assumptions of RTTT similar? If so, what outcomes might we expect? Create a different set of assumptions that might lead to improved student learning outcomes.

Chapter 7

1. In chapter 7, the author traces the history of how marketplace, choice reforms evolved. What were their origin? How and why did enthusiasm for vouchers transfer to charter schools? What are the differences and the similarities between the two?

2. What was the original mission of charters as proposed by Al Shanker? How does that differ from their purpose today?

3. Explain the argument for school choice. As you think about the corporate reforms that are in vogue today, how are they connected to Friedman's philosophy that choice will result in better schools? What are the negative consequences for local public schools that result from a choice system?

4. Analyze the evidence of the achievement effects of charter schools. To what factors does the author attribute any positive effects? Which if any, can be replicated by public schools? How does the presence of a charter in a community affect the local public school?

Chapter 8

1. Identify and describe the limitations of standardized tests. Given the limitations, for which purposes should tests be used?

2. Testing experts are concerned with the validity and reliability of tests. Research and develop an understanding of these two terms. Classify each of the author's concerns as a validity or reliability concern.

3. Why and how do high stakes purposes confound the results of student testing? Describe the ways in which schools, charters and public, can influence test results. Discuss the evidence that the author presents regarding systemic gaming of the system. What political purposes does such gaming serve? How are students shortchanged by such gaming?

4. What is Campbell's law? Rephrase it in your own words and explain its implications for testing and for adult accountability. Provide examples from this chapter.

5. Identify and describe the author's suggestions for alternative accountability measures. What end should these measures serve? If you were to develop a positive accountability system, what factors would you include? How would you address inadequate outcomes?

Chapter 9

1. The author begins the chapter with a description of her favorite high school teacher. Based on that anecdote, how would she describe a highly effective teacher? How does her definition differ from the definition currently in vogue?
2. Explain how test score data became a popular measure of teacher effectiveness. List and explain the arguments of its proponents. Do the same for the arguments against measuring effectiveness by test scores.
3. According to the author, what contributions does Teach for America make? In what ways are those contributions limited and insufficient?
4. At the end of the chapter, Diane Ravitch shares her own ideas on how to effectively use test score data in awarding tenure, and on the experiences that principals, who are entrusted to make those decisions, should have. If you were to create an evaluation system for teachers and principals, what would it include? What role, if any, would test scores play?

Chapter 10

1. Diane Ravitch begins chapter 10 with a summary of the Ford Foundation's role in the decentralization of the New York City public schools. Explain the connection with the title of the chapter. How did foundation-sponsored 'reform' change in purpose and method during the past decade?
2. Explain the dangers of 'the conspiracy of silence' in regard to philanthropic organizations.
3. According to the author, why did the Gates Foundation small school reform fail? Following the small school disappointment, how did the foundation redirect its efforts? How did the foundation manage to thwart criticism of its initiatives?
4. How do the initiatives of the big three contributors (Walton, Gates and Broad) intersect and overlap? Analyze the initiatives of Race to the Top for evidence of their influence.
5. Since the 1980s, the preponderance of research has indicated that low-track classes cause students to fall further and further behind and that they are characterized by disruptive student behavior, watered down curricula and uninspired teaching. What does that research tell us about what will occur in public schools as the number of charter schools increase?

Chapter 11

1. Diane Ravitch begins chapter 11 by listing all of the strategies which will not result in school improvement. Reflect on each and discuss how the reverse might serve as suggestions that would improve public schooling.
2. The author believes that the first component of school improvement should be the establishment of a rich, national curriculum. How do the Common Core standards contribute to that effort? How might accountability testing undermine the effort to establish high quality standards?
3. Discuss the difference between standards and curriculum. Why do you think the author recommends common curriculum rather than common standards?
4. The final argument of this chapter is that the present reforms are not only ineffective, they threaten the very existence of public schooling. Connect this final thought to the title of the book. If the present reforms hold the potential for death of public schooling, wherein lies the potential for life?

Epilogue

1. Since the publication of the first edition, the negative consequences of NCLB have continued to unfold. How and in what ways did Race to the Top extend the practices of NCLB?
2. What is the evidence to show that there was no golden age of education 40 years ago? What can we learn from NAEP data about progress during the past four decades?
3. Discuss why the 'three great teachers on a row can close the achievement gap' is a myth.
4. Discuss the setbacks to corporate reform in 2010, especially in New York City and Washington DC. How did they arise? What have we learned about the efficacy of charter schools and merit pay? Despite these setbacks, why, in your opinion, has the corporate reform movement survived?
5. Project ahead based on what you learned from this book. In ten years, if the present trend continues, what will public schools look like? How might the trend be reversed?