It would be hard to imagine more prophetic descriptions of Ravitch’s subsequent career, a 40-plus year ideological wandering through the unforgiving terrain of American schooling that has established her as education’s best-known living historian and, arguably, its most controversial figure. Ravitch has traveled from left to right and back again, morphing from staffer at a socialist magazine to the protégé of TC historian Lawrence Cremin, to Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education under the first President Bush, to fierce critic of standardized testing, accountability, school choice and privatization — policies that, she acknowledges, she helped script or for which she helped set the stage.

Those shifts have cost Ravitch friends and former colleagues. But en route she has fashioned a new kind of historicism, combining meticulous reporting with unabashed statements of opinion. Her portrayal of history in which she herself has been an actor is a blend of confession, mea culpa, self-analysis and reportage reminiscent of Joan Didion, early Gloria Steinem and Jonathan Kozol.


Ravitch has openly expressed
regret for “causing damage” through her past views. At 78, she travels the country and blogs compulsively, warning that privatization is causing the re-segregation of schools; that public schools and the teaching profession are in danger; and that test results have been “weaponized” to set up public education for a fall. Still, “changing one’s mind is the sign of a sentient being,” she says. “I hope I’m remembered for listening to the evidence and being persuaded when I’m wrong. The late Robert Hutchins [President and Chancellor of the University of Chicago] used to say that you have to listen to the other fellow because he just might be right. And I’m astonished at how many people refuse to do that.”
Step-by-Step Analysis

Ravitch begins *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (subtitled "How testing and choice are undermining American education") with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Aimed at helping schools that served students in poverty, ESEA nevertheless gave Washington a lever — money — to "incentivize" states, cities and districts to do its bidding. Ravitch follows that seismic shift through to the end of the Obama administration, chronicling the transformation of American public education from a state-funded enterprise, in which decisions were made at the building or district level, to an arena increasingly ruled by market competition and business practices aimed at keeping the nation economically competitive.

For readers in 2017, one takeaway is that the policies of the Trump administration have not come out of the blue — that current U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is in many ways a logical successor not only to Rod Paige and Margaret Spellings, who held the job under George W. Bush, but to Obama's secretary, Arne Duncan, as well. Another theme is an idea Ravitch absorbed from TC economist Harold Noah: that national systems tend to revert to the status quo. But where Noah was speaking of the reemergence in the Soviet Union of special schools for the children of elites, for Ravitch, the return to form in the United States is re-segregation — the de facto re-establishment of "the dual system that was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision."

For Ravitch, a key milestone along that pathway was *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report that warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in American schools that threatened "our very future as a nation and a people."

"Written in plain English, with just enough flair to capture the attention of the press," *A Nation at Risk*, in Ravitch's view, unwittingly "laid the ideological and rhetorical groundwork for the corporate-style reformers who three decades later maintained that our schools were declining and failing, that public education itself was 'broken' and obsolete, and that radical, free-market solutions were called for." Chief among those "reformers," Ravitch says, were Obama and Duncan, whose Race to the Top program made $5 billion accessible to only those states that pledged, among other things, to develop more charter schools. And charters, Ravitch says, have "become an industry that's ripping off the public.

"The initial bargain was 'Give us autonomy and we'll accept accountability.' The deal now is, 'Give us autonomy and we'll accept no accountability. We'll pick and choose our students. We'll kick out the kids who get low test scores. We won't accept kids with disabilities. We won't accept the kids who are English language learners. And we're not run by teachers — we're run by corporations, and you can never fire the corporation.'"

To the Barricades

Education vouchers, which enable families to spend public education dollars to send their children to private schools, are another frequent target for Ravitch.

"We know, after 25 years, that vouchers actually do harm," she told an interviewer one afternoon early this past spring at her Brooklyn Heights apartment as she packed for a speaking engagement in Texas. "Most of the kids who get vouchers go to religious schools — in many cases, fundamentalist, evangelical schools, where they get uncertified teachers and learn science and history from the Bible. They're not even learning 21st-century mathematics. So most come in as low-performing, and the next year they are worse."

Ravitch has spoken in almost every state in the country, to state unions and administrators, to the Na-
“To think critically and independently, as Teachers College preached, you often have to stand alone, and I’ve been willing to do that. I’m just trying to be right with my conscience — these are my values, this is who I am.”

-DIANE RAVITCH