

Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. Basic Books, 2016.

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In her revised and expanded edition of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, Diane Ravitch took the opportunity to make major revisions to her original book. First, she fixed a factual error relating to the Atlanta Standardized Testing Cheating Scandal, in which teachers changed student answers to raise test scores. She also addresses “significant changes in [her] perspective,” which affected the book by the inclusion of further criticism of standardized testing and removal of statements of her former advocacy for national standards and curriculum and accountability (xxii). She blames this partly on increasing evidence of “the failure of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top” (xxiii). Such a revision makes the book quite interesting – not only has the author spent time and energy researching and writing the first edition, she’s taken time for reflection and experience to give an updated and more complete version of the book.

Ravitch begins the first chapter discussing a recent office renovation which forced her to pack up and move all her papers, a process she found quite conducive to self-reflection. After going through scrapbooks of her old articles dating back almost forty years, she finds two constants among her changing views: a “skepticism about pedagogical fads, enthusiasms, and movements,” and “a deep belief in the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum, especially in history and literature,” (2-3). This sets up the rest of the book well, as these constants encompass parts of her criticism of testing and school choice.

Ravitch shows her true colors as an educational historian, and speaks about issues in terms of their history and the stories which have led them to where we are now. This makes the

book far more interesting than if she had simply cited facts and stated her positions. Some stories were quite shocking to me (for example, the implementation of a business model in the New York City Schools), and showed real examples of educational policies that didn't work. My main criticism is that a timeline of educational policies would perhaps make the book more understandable. Ravitch refers to many policies and places them in reference to the events she speaks of in each chapter, but the dates tend to blur together and an overview would help. However, I would recommend this book for an education student who isn't familiar with issues of school choice and testing, as it was very informative to me.