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Scholar's School Reform U-Turn Shakes Up Debate

By **SAM DILLON**

Diane Ravitch, the education historian who built her intellectual reputation battling progressive educators and served in the first Bush administration's [Education Department](#), is in the final stages of an astonishing, slow-motion about-face on almost every stand she once took on American schooling.

Once outspoken about the power of standardized testing, [charter schools](#) and free markets to improve schools, Dr. Ravitch is now caustically critical. She underwent an intellectual crisis, she says, discovering that these strategies, which she now calls faddish trends, were undermining public education. She resigned last year from the boards of two conservative research groups.

"School reform today is like a freight train, and I'm out on the tracks saying, 'You're going the wrong way!'" Dr. Ravitch said in an interview.

Dr. Ravitch is one of the most influential education scholars of recent decades, and her turnaround has become the buzz of school policy circles.

"What's Diane up to? That's what people are asking," said [Grover J. Whitehurst](#), who was the director of the Department of Education's research arm in the second Bush administration and is now Dr. Ravitch's colleague at the [Brookings Institution](#).

Among the topics on which Dr. Ravitch has reversed her views is the main federal law on public schools, [No Child Left Behind](#), which is up for a rewrite in coming weeks in Congress. She once supported it, but now says its requirements for testing in math and reading have squeezed vital subjects like history and art out of classrooms.

Dr. Ravitch's new posture has angered critics.

"She has done more than any one I can think of in America to drive home the message of accountability and charters and testing," said [Arthur E. Levine](#), a former president of Teachers

College, where Dr. Ravitch got her doctorate and began her teaching career in the 1970s. “Now for her to suddenly conclude that she’s been all wrong is extraordinary — and not very helpful.”

Admirers say she is returning to her roots as an advocate for public education. She rose to prominence in the 1970s with books defending the civic value of public schools from attacks by left-wing detractors, who were calling them capitalist tools to indoctrinate working-class children.

“First she angered the Marxist historians, and later the fans of progressive education and the multiculturalists,” said [Jeffrey E. Mirel](#), a professor of education and history at the [University of Michigan](#). “But she’s always defended public schools and a robust traditional curriculum, because she believes they’ve been a ladder of social mobility.”

Dr. Ravitch was born in Texas and graduated from Wellesley. She gained formidable influence during the Republican-dominated 1980s. In her meticulous office on the top floor of a 19th-century Brooklyn brownstone hangs a photograph of herself, seated next to Vice President Bush during a visit to the White House, directly across from President [Ronald Reagan](#).

In 1991, [Lamar Alexander](#), the first President Bush’s secretary of education, made her an assistant secretary, a post she used to lead a federal effort to promote the creation of state and national academic standards.

Since leaving government in 1993, Dr. Ravitch has been a much-sought-after policy analyst and research scholar, quoted in hundreds of articles on American education. And she has written five books, including “Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform” (2001) and “The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn” (2003), an influential examination of the censorship of school books by left- and right-wing pressure groups.

In her new book, “The Death and Life of the Great American School System,” she describes the bipartisan consensus that took root in the early 1990s, with her support, and has held sway since.

“The new thinking saw the public school system as obsolete, because it is controlled by the government,” she writes. “I argued that certain managerial and structural changes — that is, choice, charters, merit pay and accountability — would help to reform our schools.”

In January 2001, Dr. Ravitch was at the White House to hear President [George W. Bush](#) outline his vision for No Child Left Behind, which Congress approved with bipartisan majorities and which became law in 2002.

“It sounded terrific,” she recalled in the interview.

There were signs soon after, however, that her views were changing. She had endorsed mayoral control of New York City schools before Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) obtained it in 2002, but by 2004 she had emerged as a fierce critic. Some said she was nursing a grudge because close friends had lost jobs in the mayor’s shake-up of the schools’ bureaucracy.

In 2005, she said, a study she undertook of Pakistan’s weak and inequitable education system, dominated by private and religious institutions, convinced her that protecting the United States’ public schools was important to democracy.

She remembers another date, Nov. 30, 2006, when at a Washington conference she heard a dozen experts conclude that the No Child law was not raising student achievement.

These and other experiences left her increasingly disaffected from the choice and accountability movements. Charter schools, she concluded, were proving to be no better on average than regular schools, but in many cities were bleeding resources from the public system. Testing had become not just a way to measure student learning, but an end in itself.

“Accountability, as written into federal law, was not raising standards but dumbing down the schools,” she writes. “The effort to upend American public education and replace it with something that was market-based began to feel too radical for me.”

She said she began to feel estranged intellectually from close colleagues.

One she heard criticize the No Child law was [Chester E. Finn Jr.](#), a former assistant secretary of education with whom she had written a book and worked at two conservative research groups, the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) and the [Koret Task Force](#) at the Hoover Institution at [Stanford University](#).

They were ideological soul mates and just plain chums. Often over the last decade, they were on the phone together or exchanging e-mail messages half a dozen times a day. But although Mr. Finn had become critical of the No Child law, he remained an advocate of charter schools and school choice.

By 2008, Mr. Finn said, “there were more and more issues where the staff and everybody else on the Fordham board would say, ‘Let’s do A,’ and Diane would say, ‘Let’s do B.’ ”

Finally, she recalled, “I told everybody at a dinner meeting at Koret that I was going to resign, and they all said, ‘Come on, stay — we need somebody to argue with us.’ Dr. Ravitch stayed on

for a time, but left both organizations last spring.

Mr. Finn has done his own rethinking, and he said he shared many of her disappointments.

“Standards, in many places, have proven nebulous and low,” he writes in a coming essay.

“‘Accountability’ has turned to test-cramming and bean-counting, often limited to basic reading and math skills.”

But Mr. Finn has reached sharply different conclusions from Dr. Ravitch.

“Diane says, ‘Let’s return to the old public school system,’ ” he said. “I say let’s blow it up.”

But Dr. Ravitch is finding many supporters. She told school superintendents at a convention in Phoenix last month that the United States’ educational policies were ill-conceived, compared with those in nations with the best-performing schools.

“Nations like Finland and Japan seek out the best college graduates for teaching positions, prepare them well, pay them well and treat them with respect,” she said. “They make sure that all their students study the arts, history, literature, geography, civics, foreign languages, the sciences and other subjects. They do this because this is the way to ensure good education. We’re on the wrong track.”

The superintendents gave Dr. Ravitch a standing ovation.

“We totally agreed with what she had to say,” said [Eugene G. White](#), superintendent of the Indianapolis Public Schools. “We were amazed to see that she’d changed her tune.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 4, 2010

An article on Wednesday about a surprising reversal by the education historian Diane Ravitch of almost every position she once took on American schooling misstated the number of books she has either written or edited since leaving government in 1993. It is 18, not 5. (That is how many she has written.)