

Monday Daybook: Tea Party Funders Exposed, Hillary for Veep?



Why I Changed My Mind

Diane Ravitch

May 27, 2010 | This article appeared in the June 14, 2010 edition of The Nation.

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When I joined the administration of George H.W. Bush in 1991, I had no preconceived ideas about choice and accountability. "Choice" meant vouchers, a cause that had been rebuffed repeatedly in state referendums and by the courts; the issue had never gotten my attention. "Accountability" was one of those platitudinous terms that everyone used admiringly but no one did anything about. My abiding interest, then and now, was curriculum—that is, the knowledge that is purposefully taught in subjects like history, geography, the arts, literature, civics, science and mathematics. I believed that American schools should have a coherent curriculum so that teachers would know what they are expected to teach and children would have continuity of instruction, no matter where they lived.

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However, after I left the administration in 1993, I supported the nascent charter school movement, even going to Albany, New York, to urge legislators to adopt a law permitting such schools to be created in the state. I supported merit pay as a form of accountability, on the assumption that teachers whose students are more successful should be paid more than their peers. I supported testing, expecting that better information would help to pinpoint where improvement was needed. I was affiliated with conservative think tanks, including the Manhattan Institute, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Hoover Institution. When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 and President George W. Bush signed it in 2002, I applauded.

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Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, was assistant secretary of education for...

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In my new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, I describe how I came to repudiate my support for choice and accountability, though not for curriculum reform, which I still believe is necessary and valuable. Some news accounts have said I did a U-turn, but in fact I was really reverting to the time before I jumped on the bandwagon of organizational change and accountability, the time when I knew that the only changes that matter are in the classroom and in children's lives. Reaching this conclusion was not an overnight conversion but rather the result of watching how the policies of choice and accountability played out in reality. I began to re-evaluate my views as early as 2004, as I watched the implementation of mayoral control in New York City, with its heavy emphasis on accountability and choice.

Many people have told me that I should have known better, and they are right: I should have. But I didn't, and I am trying to make up for it now.

NCLB made accountability the nation's education policy. It used to be the case that educators could more or less ignore federal education policy, because it seldom touched their classrooms.

Thanks to NCLB, this is no longer the case. Now federal policy affects every school. In my book I define the governing philosophy of NCLB as "measure and punish." I conclude that this approach, which uses accountability as a stick to threaten schools, has failed.

The law requires that every state test every student from grades three to eight in reading and mathematics, then disaggregate each school's scores by race, limited English proficiency, disability and low-income status. The law mandates that every student in every group must reach 100 percent proficiency by 2014. Every state is left to choose its own test and define proficiency as it wishes. If only one group in a school fails to make steady progress toward that goal, the school faces increasingly severe remedies and sanctions. First, the school will be put on notice; then all students in the school (including those who are doing well) will be offered the choice to go to a different school. In the third year, low-income students will be offered free tutoring after school. If the school does not meet its projected target over five consecutive years, it may be privatized or handed over to state control or charter managers; its staff may be fired, it may be closed or it may be restructured in some other way. Currently,

about one-third of all public schools in the nation—more than 30,000—have been stigmatized as failing because they did not make what the law calls "adequate yearly progress."

At the same time that NCLB told states to set their own standards, Congress directed them to participate in the federal tests, known as NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), which serve as an external audit of their claims. (Some cities also take the NAEP exams but do so voluntarily, to learn how they compare with the rest of the nation.) Since NAEP is administered to samples of students, no one knows in advance which students will take it, so no one can prepare for it and no one has any incentive to cheat or game the system.

By demanding that all students reach proficiency by 2014, NCLB incentivized states, districts and schools to cheat and game the system. That is the direct outcome of high-stakes testing. Some states have lowered their testing standards, thus making it easier for students to be rated "proficient." Consequently, many states now claim dramatic improvement in their test scores, but these gains are not reflected on the tests given every other year by the federal government. In Texas, where there was supposed to have been an educational miracle, eighth-grade reading scores have been flat for a decade. Tennessee claimed that 90 percent of its students were proficient in 2007, but on NAEP only 26 percent were.

In contrast, progress on the NAEP tests has been meager. Billions have been invested at the federal and state levels in testing and test-preparation materials. Many schools suspend instruction for months before the state tests, in hopes of boosting scores. Students are drilled on how to answer the precise types of questions that are likely to appear on the state tests. Testing experts suggest that this intense emphasis on test preparation is wasted, because students tend to learn test-taking techniques rather than the subject tested, and they are not likely to do well on a different test of the same subject for which they were not prepared.

Despite the time and money invested in testing, scores on NAEP have increased slowly or not at all. In mathematics the rate of improvement was greater *before* NCLB was passed. In reading there have been gains in fourth grade, but the national scores for eighth graders were essentially the same in 2009 as they were in 1998.

It is not only the sluggish improvement in test scores that is troubling. Nor is it the frequency with which states and districts manipulate the scoring of the tests to produce inflated gains. The biggest victim of high-stakes testing is the quality of education. As more time is devoted to reading and math, and as teachers are warned that the scores in these subjects will determine the fate of their school, everything other than reading and math gets less time. This is what doesn't count: history, literature, geography, science, the arts, foreign languages, physical education, civics, etc.

So, the emphasis on accountability for the past eight years has encouraged schools to pay less attention to important subjects and inflate their test scores by hook or by crook. NCLB's remedies don't work, its sanctions don't work and the results are unimpressive. Why members of Congress and Washington think tanks continue to defend this toxic law is a puzzle.

The other popular nostrum of our day is "choice," which has captured the imagination of big foundations and many wealthy business leaders. Vouchers still have fervent proponents, even though only 30,000 students use them, and there is slight evidence of their effectiveness. Vouchers have been replaced by charters as the vehicle for promoting free-market reforms. What was but an idea in the late 1980s is a full-blown movement today, with 1.5 million students enrolled in 5,000 charter schools.

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1. posted by: Tina I. at 07/08/2010 @ 1:14pm

Long article but interesting - It's such a tough tightrope that has to be walked by all. It's wrong that good teachers would lose their tenure but equally as wrong for bad ones to keep it. A teachers attitude can make or break the whole education experience, just as a coach can destroy a sport for a budding athlete. Instructors that have lost their "edge" or care for the student need to step aside. Everything has a shelf life. I have always believed that good values start at home, but included in the line-up of values is the teaching from parents to their children that the

things in life that are worth having are worth fighting for. And that means, at the most basic level, they must learn to fight the urge at home to play and instead do their homework if they cannot get it done in class.

Throughout the history of life itself we see the "survival of the fittest" in all aspects of life. It may not seem fair most of the time, but it seems to be the "story of all life". We can chose to be a product of our environment or rise above it and move forward.

There are countless stories throughout history of individuals that have risen out of the depths of poverty, chaos etc, and made a choice to be better than what they came from. Why? Because everyone has an individual choice to change - to be better...or not. Testing for the sake of scores to give a school a "grade" seems twisted at best, but the public sector needs a standard. Even though for some schools it may seem that the bar is set too high, it doesn't seem right to have a thousand different bar levels either. How then could the kids pass as an "equal"? Then colleges around the country would have to lower their bars as well because there would be so many that "passed" K-12 that thought they were ready for college and are not. Constantly lowering the bar is self destructive on every level.

2. posted by: wxb at 06/02/2010 @ 10:24pm

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3. posted by: Milhaus1 at 06/02/2010 @ 9:51pm

5. posted by: mhalpert at 05/30/2010 @ 12:40pm

NCLB was a well intentioned disaster

I would like to believe that's try, but they knew that it was a huge unfunded mandate who's failure could ultimately be blamed on the educators who they despise for opposing things like vouchers for religious schools.

4. posted by: Milhaus1 at 06/02/2010 @ 9:47pm

That's fair, Diane. It's good to hope for the best when it comes to trying something new. As you said, in the end incentives will only encourage people to play by the rules that will garner the reward. Since caring about children is an intangible personal value that produces thousands of permutations to produce the form of a 'good teacher', any incentives will dumb down the education process a formula for looking good on paper. And anyone who has had to deal with looking good on paper knows, it has little to do with actual success.

5. posted by: Yad061 at 06/02/2010 @ 5:46pm

When will the New World learn that you need the Baccalauréat or O-levels and A-levels or something of the sort, to build a good educational system on?

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