

Reaction to Ravitch: A different view of Common Core

By Valerie Strauss
Reporter

Jan. 21, 2014 at 12:15 p.m. CST



(freepik.com)

I [published the text of a speech](#) that education historian and activist Diane Ravitch gave this month about the past, present and future of the Common Core State Standards to the Modern Language Association. (You can [read it here](#).) Here's a response from Professor [Gerald Graff](#), a former president of the Modern Language Association who teaches English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and who heard Ravitch give her speech.

By Gerald Graff

"Public education is not broken," says Diane Ravitch in her [new book](#), "[Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools](#)." The "diagnosis" of the corporate reformers "is wrong," Ravitch writes, and their solutions are also wrong. "Our urban schools are in trouble because of concentrated poverty and racial segregation. But public education as such is not 'broken,'" and "the solutions proposed by the self-proclaimed reformers have not worked as promised."

Ravitch's argument — that the real problem is not public education but its would-be reformers — has become a familiar one for opponents of current attempts to reform the American educational system. Like most such opponents, Ravitch concedes that the system is far from perfect, but she argues that the causes lie in social conditions outside education, in "concentrated poverty and racial segregation," as she puts it, and in the false story of a broken system that reformers disseminate in order to justify privatizing education and enriching themselves. So goes this argument.

I don't buy it.

Ravitch is right, I think, that the solutions proposed by today's reformers — more charters, more standardized tests and fetishized test data, all of it used punitively, more privatization — are not

working to improve schools and students. But nothing in her critique of the reform movement required Ravitch to minimize the failures of public education, which I think we educators should own up to.

I also agree with Ravitch that [poverty](#) and [segregation](#) account for some of the failures of schools and students, but hardly all. Few of the college students I teach are poor and many are white, middle class, and relatively privileged, yet their command of basic skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking falls far short of their potential. This problem has been documented by a number of studies, including Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses," Derek Bok's "Our Underachieving Colleges," the National Study of Student Engagement, and the High School Survey of Student Engagement.

To be sure, about 10-15 percent of our college students do beautifully. The American educational system has always been good at educating the small minority of students who are *already* relatively well educated when they start. But it has done little to help the great majority of students who are essentially confused about how to do academic work, about how to analyze a text and summarize its argument, or about how to make an argument of one's own.

This is why I like the new [Common Core State Standards](#), which focus on precisely these "college readiness" skills that my students not only struggle with but don't seem to have been told are important. Ravitch largely dismisses the Common Core Standards as a byproduct of the false sense of crisis stirred up by corporate reformers, and consequently she doesn't address the *intellectual* merits of the Standards, which are far superior to the standards applied under the No Child Left Behind law. As Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman point out in a recent book, "Pathways to the Common Core," the Common Core Standards "emphasize much higher comprehension skills than previous standards" and thus represent "an urgently needed wake-up-call" to American education. E. D. Hirsch has said the same thing.

Here are a few of the skills the Common Core Standards say students should be learning by the eighth grade:

*Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient.

*Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence...

*...acknowledge and distinguish [one's own] claims from alternate or opposing claims

What is easy to overlook is that standards like these aren't just another set of hurdles for students to jump over. They actually serve an important teaching function by defining and clarifying mysteries about college level work that colleges themselves leave students to figure out on their own. It shouldn't have taken a document from the K-12 sector to disclose secrets of college readiness that we in higher education should have spelled out long ago. I sometimes think the only places where "college readiness" isn't being discussed these days are colleges.

In a backhanded way, Ravitch does acknowledge the intellectual merits of the Common Core Standards when she predicts that their "enhanced rigor" may "cause test scores to plummet by as much as 30 per cent, even in successful districts." If this drop occurs, she says, the reformers will take it as further proof of "our nation's 'broken' educational system" and another excuse "to create a burgeoning market for new products and technologies." True, but what follows from this argument? That we shouldn't set reasonable proficiency standards because too many students won't meet them?

At times Ravitch seems to suggest a much better argument: if we are going to raise standards, then we need to do a much better job of helping all students measure up to them, especially the economically

deprived, which would mean using the Common Core Standards productively rather than punitively. I could not agree more, but in order to help students meet these higher standards schools and colleges will have to improve a lot more than Ravitch thinks necessary.

Let's face it. It is the failures of public education that have opened the doors that advocates of privatization have rushed through, and I think it's reasonable to give them a chance to show what they can do. But here, I think, Ravitch makes her strongest argument against privatization: that its corporate-backed charter schools are doing no better than traditional public schools. This lack of success seems more likely to stop privatization than unconvincing claims that public education isn't all that bad.

When defenders of public education deny or minimize its failures, we—I count myself one—only vindicate the charge of neo-liberals and conservatives that we are so complacent that we will never clean up our own educational house. The fact that the current fix isn't working doesn't mean we don't have a whole lot to fix.

Link to the original article [HERE](#)